
Questions of Language

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Bilingual Education: The Key to Basic Skills,
angelo gonzalez

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Bilingual Education: Outdated and Unrealistic,
richard rodriguez

Why should any words be called obscene? Don't they all describe natural human functions? Am I trying to tell them, my students demand, that the "strong, earthy, gut-honest"—or, if they are fans of Norman Mailer, the "rich, liberating, existential"—language they use to describe sexual activity isn't preferable to "phony-sounding, middle-class words like 'intercourse' and 'copulate'?" "Cop You Late!" they say with fancy inflections and gagging grimaces. "Now, what is *that* supposed to mean?

Four-Letter Words Can Hurt You,
barbara lawrence

The first time it happened to me I was nine years old. Cornered in the school bathroom by the class bully and her sidekick, I was offered the opportunity to swallow a few of my teeth unless I satisfactorily explained why I always got good grades, why I talked "proper" or "white."

What's Wrong with Black English?

rachel l. jones

h1,angelo gonzalez·BILINGUAL EDUCATION: THE KEY TO BASIC SKILLSANGELO GONZALEZ

Bilingual Education: The Key to Basic Skills

Angelo Gonzalez serves as educational director of ASPIRA, an organization that promotes awareness and advocacy of issues related to Hispanic Americans. This essay and the essay by Richard Rodriguez that follows it appeared as companion pieces in the New York Times "Educational Supplement." Together, these essays suggest the complexity of the bilingual education question.

Suggestions for Prereading or Journal Writing

1.

If you moved to a foreign country and had the choice of attending either a school where classes were taught in your native language or one where classes were conducted in the foreign language, which one would you choose? What problems might you encounter in the school of your choice? What might you learn (or fail to learn)?

2.

Write about a particular educational experience in which you didn't learn as much as you wanted to. What factors came into play in this experience? How might you have learned more in this situation?

If we accept that a child cannot learn unless taught through the language he speaks and understands; that a child who does not speak or understand English must fall behind when English is the dominant medium of instruction; that one needs to learn English so as to be able to participate in an English-speaking society; that self-esteem and motivation are necessary for effective learning; that rejection of a child's native language and culture is detrimental to the learning process: then any necessary effective educational program for limited or no English-speaking ability must incorporate the following:

Language arts and comprehensive reading programs taught in the child's native language.

Curriculum content areas taught in the native language to further comprehension and academic achievement.

Intensive instruction in English.

Use of materials sensitive to and reflecting the culture of children within the program.

Most Important Goal

The mastery of basic reading skills is the most important goal in primary education since reading is the basis for much of all subsequent learning. Ordinarily, these skills are learned at home. But where beginning reading is taught in English, only the English-speaking child profits from these early acquired skills that are prerequisites to successful reading development. Reading programs taught in English to children with Spanish as a first language waste their acquired linguistic attributes and also impede learning by forcing them to absorb skills of reading simultaneously with a new language.

Both local and national research data provide ample evidence for the efficacy of well-implemented programs. The New York City Board of Education Report on Bilingual Pupil Services for 1982-83 indicated that in all areas of the curriculum—English, Spanish and mathematics—and at all grade levels, students demonstrated statistically significant gains in tests of reading in English and Spanish and in math. In all but two of the programs reviewed, the attendance rates of students in the program, ranging from 86 to 94 percent, were higher than those of the general school population. Similar higher attendance rates were found among students in high school bilingual programs.

At Yale University, Kenji Hakuta, a linguist, reported recently on a study of working-class Hispanic students in the New Haven bilingual program. He found that children who were the most bilingual, that is, who developed English without the loss of Spanish, were brighter in both verbal and nonverbal tests. Over time, there was an increasing correlation between English and Spanish—a finding that clearly contradicts the charge that teaching in the home language is detrimental to English. Rather the two languages are interdependent within the bilingual child, reinforcing each other.

Essential Contribution

As Jim Cummins of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education has argued, the use and development of the native language makes an essential contribution to the development of minority children's subject-matter knowledge and academic learning potential. In fact, at least three national data bases—the National Assessment of Educational Progress, National Center for Educational Statistics—High School and Beyond Studies, and the Survey of Income and Education—suggest that there are long-term positive effects among high school students who have participated in bilingual-education programs. These students are achieving higher scores on tests of verbal and mathematics skills. These and similar findings buttress the argument stated persuasively in the recent joint recommendation of the Academy for Educational Development and the Hazen Foundation, namely, that America needs to become a more multilingual nation and children who speak a non-English language are a national resource to be nurtured in school.

Unfortunately, the present Administration's educational policies would seem to be leading us in the opposite direction. Under the guise of protecting the common language of public life in the United States, William J. Bennett, the Secretary of Education, unleashed a frontal attack on bilingual education. In a major policy address, he engaged in rhetorical distortions about the nature and effectiveness of bilingual programs, pointing only to unnamed negative research findings to justify the Administration's retrenchment efforts.

Arguing for the need to give local school districts greater flexibility in determining appropriate methodologies in serving limited-English-proficient students, Mr. Bennett fails to realize that, in fact, districts serving large numbers of language-minority students, as is the case in New York City, do have that flexibility. Left to their own devices in implementing legal mandates, many school districts have performed poorly at providing services to all entitled language-minority students.

A Harsh Reality

The harsh reality in New York City for language-minority students was documented comprehensively last month by the Educational Priorities Panel. The panel's findings revealed that of the 113,831 students identified as being limited in English proficiency, as many as 44,000 entitled students are not receiving any bilingual services. The issue at hand is, therefore, not one of choice but rather violation of the rights of almost 40 percent of language-minority children to equal educational opportunity. In light of these findings the Reagan Administration's recent statements only serve to exacerbate existing inequities in the American educational system for linguistic-minority children. Rather than adding fuel to a misguided debate, the Administration would serve these children best by insuring the full funding of the 1984 Bilingual Education Reauthorization Act as passed by the Congress.

Suggestions for Writing and Discussion

1. In your own words and in one sentence only, what is Gonzalez's central point in this essay?
- 2.

List and evaluate the specific sources Gonzalez uses in order to support his thesis. How credible are these sources? How reliable are they? How varied and up to date are they?

3.

In this essay, Gonzalez chooses to appeal to the reader's sense of logic, for the most part. First of all, why do you think he adopts this rhetorical approach? Second, for what specific readers might this approach be most effective? Explain your answers.

4.

Gonzalez claims that "children who speak a non-English language are a national resource to be nurtured in school." However, he does not provide specifics as to how this should be done. If you were an elementary school teacher, what specifically could you do in order to nurture these children?

5.

Gonzalez writes that bilingual education is not a matter of choice: It is a matter of rights. On what principle does he base this claim? Do you agree or disagree with his position here? Explain your answer.

Suggestion for Extended Thinking and Writing

Call several schools in your area to learn whether bilingual education is a concern. If it is, discover how they approach this issue. Talk with a variety of people in the schools: teachers, principals, even students. Also, research your state and local school offices in order to discover what the existing policy is on bilingual education. Write a report on your findings and share it with your class.

RICHARD RODRIGUEZ

Bilingual Education: Outdated and Unrealistic

*Born to Mexican immigrant parents in 1944, Richard Rodriguez experienced painful conflicts between speaking Spanish—his "home" language—and speaking English—the "public" language expected from him at school. He resolved these conflicts by speaking, reading, and writing English nearly exclusively from his elementary school years onward. After graduating from Stanford University, he earned a graduate degree from the University of California, Berkeley, and later became a professor of Renaissance literature at Berkeley. Best known for his autobiography, *Hunger for Memory* (1982), Rodriguez has written extensively about issues related to bilingual learning.*

Suggestions for Prereading or Journal Writing

1.

Have you ever experienced a conflict between what you learned at home and what you encountered in the classroom at school? If so, describe the conflict and explain how you resolved it, or discuss why you believe the conflict remains unresolved.

2.

If you are bilingual (or multilingual), explain the benefits as well as any drawbacks you see in knowing more than one language. If you are not bilingual (or multilingual), talk with someone who is, asking this person about the advantages and disadvantages of knowing two or more languages. Then explain your response to what you have learned.

How shall we teach the dark-eyed child *ingles*? The debate continues much as it did two decades ago.

Bilingual education belongs to the 1960's, the years of the black civil rights movement. Bilingual education became the official Hispanic demand; as a symbol, the English-only classroom was intended to be analogous to the segregated lunch counter; the locked school door. Bilingual education was endorsed by judges and, of course, by politicians well before anyone knew the answer to the question: Does bilingual education work? Who knows? *Quien sabe?*

The official drone over bilingual education is conducted by educationalists with numbers and charts. Because bilingual education was never simply a matter of pedagogy, it is too much to expect educators to resolve the matter. Proclamations concerning bilingual education are weighted at bottom with Hispanic political grievances and, too, with middle-class romanticism.

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No one will say it in public; in private, Hispanics argue with me about bilingual education and every time it comes down to memory. Everyone remembers going to that grammar school where students were slapped for speaking Spanish. Childhood memory is offered as parable; the memory is meant to compress the gringo's long history of offenses against Spanish, Hispanic culture, Hispanics.

It is no coincidence that, although all of America's ethnic groups are implicated in the policy of bilingual education, Hispanics, particularly Mexican-Americans, have been its chief advocates. The English words used by Hispanics in support of bilingual education are words such as "dignity," "heritage," "culture." Bilingualism becomes a way of exacting from gringos a grudging admission of contrition—for the 19th-century theft of the Southwest, the relegation of Spanish to a foreign tongue, the injustice of history. At the extreme, Hispanic bilingual enthusiasts demand that public schools "maintain" a student's sense of separateness.

Hispanics may be among the last groups of Americans who still believe in the 1960's. Bilingual-education proposals still serve the romance of that decade, especially of the late 60's, when the heroic black civil rights movement grew paradoxically wedded to its opposite—the ethnic revival movement. Integration and separatism merged into twin, possible goals.

With integration, the black movement inspired middle-class Americans to imitations—the Hispanic movement; the Gray Panthers; feminism; gay rights. Then there was withdrawal, with black glamour leading a romantic retreat from the anonymous crowd. Americans came to want it both ways. They wanted in and they wanted out. Hispanics took to celebrating their diversity, joined other Americans in dancing rings around the melting pot.

Mythic Metaphors

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More intently than most, Hispanics wanted the romance of their dual cultural allegiance backed up by law. Bilingualism became proof that one could have it both ways, could be a full member of public America and yet also separate, privately Hispanic. "Spanish" and "English" became mythic metaphors like country and city, describing separate islands of private and public life. Ballots, billboards, and, of course, classrooms in Spanish. For nearly two decades now, middle-class Hispanics have had it their way. They have foisted a neat ideological scheme on working-class children. What they want to believe about

themselves, they wait for the child to prove, that it is possible to be two, that one can assume the public language (the public life) of America, even while remaining what one was, existentially separate.

Adulthood is not so neatly balanced. The tension between public and private life is intrinsic to adulthood—certainly middle-class adulthood. Usually the city wins because the city pays. We are mass people for more of the day than we are with our intimates. No Congressional mandate or Supreme Court decision can diminish the loss.

I was talking the other day to a carpenter from Riga, in the Soviet Republic of Latvia. He has been here six years. He told me of his having to force himself to relinquish the “luxury” of reading books in Russian or Latvian so he could begin to read books in English. And the books he was able to read in English were not of a complexity to satisfy him. But he was not going back to Riga.

Beyond any question of pedagogy there is the simple fact that a language gets learned as it gets used, fills one’s mouth, one’s mind, with the new names for things.

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The civil rights movement of the 1960’s taught Americans to deal with forms of discrimination other than economic—racial, sexual. We forget class. We talk about bilingual education as an ethnic issue; we forget to notice that the program mainly touches the lives of working-class immigrant children. Foreign-language acquisition is one thing for the upper-class child in a convent school learning to curtsy. Language acquisition can only seem a loss for the ghetto child, for the new language is psychologically awesome, being, as it is, the language of the bus driver and Papa’s employer. The child’s difficulty will turn out to be psychological more than linguistic because what he gives up are symbols of home.

Pain and Guilt

I was that child! I faced the stranger’s English with pain and guilt and fear. Baptized to English in school, at first I felt myself drowning—the ugly sounds forced down my throat—until slowly, slowly (held in the tender grip of my teachers), suddenly the conviction took; English was my language to use.

What I yearn for is some candor from those who speak about bilingual education. Which of its supporters dares speak of the price a child pays—the price of adulthood—to make the journey from a working-class home into a middle-class schoolroom? The real story, the silent story of the immigrant child’s journey is one of embarrassments in public; betrayal of all that is private; silence at home; and at school the hand tentatively raised. Bilingual enthusiasts bespeak an easier world. They seek a linguistic solution to a social dilemma. They seem to want to believe that there is an easy way for the child to balance private and public, in order to believe that there is some easy way for themselves.

Ten years ago, I started writing about the ideological implications of bilingual education. Ten years from now some newspaper may well invite me to contribute another Sunday supplement essay on the subject. The debate is going to continue. The bilingual establishment is now inside the door. Jobs are at stake. Politicians can only count heads; growing numbers of Hispanics will insure the compliance of politicians.

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Publicly, we will continue the fiction. We will solemnly address this issue as an educational question, a matter of pedagogy. But privately, Hispanics will still seek from bilingual education an admission from the gringo that Spanish has value and presence.

Hispanics of middle class will continue to seek the romantic assurance of separateness. Experts will argue. Dark-eyed children will sit in the classroom. Mute.
Suggestions for Writing and Discussion

1.

How does Rodriguez's basic contention differ from Gonzalez's main point (see "Bilingual Education," pages 453–455)?

2.

Gonzalez appeals primarily to the reader's reason. What appeal(s) does Rodriguez choose in this piece? Find five specific words, phrases, or passages that support your answer; and go on to explain how each phrase affected you as a reader.

3.

Gonzalez's use of local and national test results seems convincing, and yet Rodriguez claims that we still don't know whether or not bilingual education works. Why isn't he convinced by these statistics? Do you agree with him? Explain.

4.

Although both Rodriguez and Gonzalez are members of Hispanic cultures, their goals for the education of Hispanic children differ. Explain the goals that each writer promotes in his piece, and draw some inferences about what is at the core of their disagreement.

5.

In a public school, should a child be entitled to his or her native language in the classroom? Support your position with three convincing reasons, and address opposing viewpoints as part of your argument.

6.

After reading both Rodriguez's and Gonzalez's essays, which approach do you feel would be most effective for residents in your community or in a community nearby that has a significant bilingual population? In your answer, explain how several specific points the author makes might connect with the characteristics specific to your community.

Suggestion for Extended Thinking and Writing

Many countries—for example, Belgium, Holland, and Switzerland—have more than one official language. In addition, in many countries students learn at least one other language (often English) in addition to their country's official language(s). Do research on the language education in these countries and then argue for or against the following proposition: "Every student in the United States should be required to become fluent both in English and in at least one other language."

BARBARA LAWRENCE

Four-Letter Words Can Hurt You

Barbara Lawrence is a professor of language and literature at the State University of New York, Old Westbury. She has written extensively on questions of language, particularly from a feminist perspective. This essay first appeared as an Op Ed piece in the New York Times in 1973.

Suggestions for Prereading or Journal Writing

1.

List all of the terms you can think of that men use in referring to women. Similarly, list all of the terms you can think of that women use when referring to men. Compare these two lists and come to some conclusions: What do men who use certain terms really think of women, and what do women who use certain terms think of men?

2.

What five words in the English language do you find most offensive? Can you think of a situation in which these words would not be offensive to you? Explain.

Why should any words be called obscene? Don't they all describe natural human functions? Am I trying to tell them, my students demand, that the "strong, earthy, gut-honest"—or, if they are fans of Norman Mailer, the "rich, liberating, existential"—language they use to describe sexual activity isn't preferable to "phony-sounding, middle-class words like 'intercourse' and 'copulate'?" "Cop You Late!" they say with fancy inflections and gagging grimaces. "Now, what is *that* supposed to mean?"

Well, what is it supposed to mean? And why indeed should one group of words describing human functions and human organs be acceptable in ordinary conversation and another, describing presumably the same organs and functions, be tabooed—so much so, in fact, that some of these words still cannot appear in print in many parts of the English-speaking world?

The argument that these taboos exist only because of "sexual hangups" (middle-class, middle-age, feminist), or even that they are a result of class oppression (the contempt of the Norman conquerors for the language of their Anglo-Saxon serfs), ignores a much more likely explanation, it seems to me, and that is the sources and functions of the words themselves.

The best known of the tabooed sexual verbs, for example, comes from the German *ficken*, meaning "to strike"; combined, according to Partridge's etymological dictionary *Origins*, with the Latin sexual verb *futuere*; associated in turn with the Latin *fustis*, "a staff or cudgel"; the Celtic *buc*, "a point, hence to pierce"; the Irish *bot*, "the male member"; the Latin *battuere*, "to beat"; the Gaelic *batair*, "a cudgeller"; the Early Irish *bualaim*, "I strike"; and so forth. It is one of what etymologists sometimes call "the sadistic group of words for the man's part in copulation."

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The brutality of this word, then, and its equivalents ("screw," "bang," etc.), is not an illusion of the middle class or a crotchet of Women's Liberation. In their origins and imagery these words carry undeniably painful, if not sadistic, implications, the object of which is almost always female. Consider, for example, what a "screw" actually does to the wood it penetrates; what a painful, even mutilating, activity this kind of analogy suggests. "Screw" is particularly interesting in this context, since the noun, according to Partridge, comes from words meaning "groove," "nut," "ditch," "breeding sow," "scrofula" and "swelling," while the verb, besides its explicit imagery, has antecedent associations to "write on," "scratch," "scarify," and so forth—a revealing fusion of a mechanical or painful action with an obviously denigrated object.

Not all obscene words, of course, are as implicitly sadistic or denigrating to women as these, but all that I know seem to serve a similar purpose: to reduce the human organism (especially the female organism) and human functions (especially sexual and procreative)

to their least organic, most mechanical dimension; to substitute a trivializing or deforming resemblance for the complex human reality of what is being described. Tabooed male descriptives, when they are not openly denigrating to women, often serve to divorce a male organ or function from any significant interaction with the female. Take the word “testes,” for example, suggesting “witnesses” (from the Latin *testis*) to the sexual and procreative strengths of the male organ; and the obscene counterpart of this word, which suggests little more than a mechanical shape. Or compare almost any of the “rich,” “liberating” sexual verbs, so fashionable today among male writers, with that much-derided Latin word “copulate” (“to bind or join together”) or even that Anglo-Saxon phrase (which seems to have had no trouble surviving the Norman Conquest) “make love.”

How arrogantly self-involved the tabooed words seem in comparison to either of the other terms, and how contemptuous of the female partner. Understandably so, of course, if she is only a “skirt,” a “broad,” a “chick,” a “pussycat” or a “piece.” If she is, in other words, no more than her skirt, or what her skirt conceals; no more than a breeder, or the broadest part of her; no more than a piece of human being or a “piece of tail.”

The most severely tabooed of all the female descriptives, incidentally, are those like a “piece of tail,” which suggest (either explicitly or through antecedents) that there is no significant difference between the female channel through which we are all conceived and born and the anal outlet common to both sexes—a distinction that pornographers have always enjoyed obscuring.

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This effort to deny women their biological identity, their individuality, their humanness, is such an important aspect of obscene language that one can only marvel at how seldom, in an era preoccupied with definitions of obscenity, this fact is brought to our attention. One problem, of course, is that many of the people in the best position to do this (critics, teachers, writers) are so reluctant today to admit that they are angered or shocked by obscenity. Bored, maybe, unimpressed, aesthetically displeased, but—no matter how brutal or denigrating the material—never angered, never shocked.

And yet how eloquently angered, how piously shocked many of these same people become if denigrating language is used about any minority group other than women; if the obscenities are racial or ethnic, that is, rather than sexual. Words like “coon,” “kike,” “spic,” “wop,” after all, deform identity, deny individuality and humanness in almost exactly the same way that sexual vulgarisms and obscenities do.

No one that I know, least of all my students, would fail to question the values of a society whose literature and entertainment rested heavily on racial or ethnic pejoratives. Are the values of a society whose literature and entertainment rest as heavily as ours on sexual pejoratives any less questionable?

Suggestions for Writing and Discussion

1.

Barbara Lawrence’s piece was first published in 1973. Is this topic more or less relevant in terms of life in the 1990s? Support your answer with specifics.

2.

Lawrence argues that words should be considered obscene on the basis of their original sources and their functions. First, explain what she means by “source” and “function.”

Second, does she convince you that these aspects of words should be taken into consideration to determine whether or not a word should be deemed obscene?

3.

Why does Lawrence so clearly include derogatory ethnic terms like *kike*, *coon*, and *wop* (paragraph 11), whereas she fails to list the taboo sexual terms?

4.

Even if you totally agree with Lawrence on this issue, come up with an argument that counterattacks one of her main points. Can you further predict how she might respond to this debate?

5.

Do you agree with Lawrence on her point that people today are not shocked when they hear “obscene” language? If you agree, what factors in our society may serve to desensitize people to these words? If you disagree, offer specific examples as support for your position.

Suggestion for Extended Thinking and Writing

Get acquainted with the *Oxford English Dictionary* by researching the origin, use, changes, and meanings of three of your favorite words. (Brainstorm on this first!) What did you learn about these words by using this source?

ROBIN LAKOFF

Talking Like a Lady

Born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, Robin Lakoff is a professor of linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley. She is coauthor of Face Value: The Politics of Beauty (1984) and When Talk Is Not Cheap: Or, How to Find the Right Therapist When You Don't Know Where to Begin (1985). "Talking Like a Lady" is excerpted from her book Language and a Woman's Place (1975).

Suggestion for Prereading or Journal Writing

According to some studies, when men and women talk with one another, the following things happen: Women ask 70 percent of the questions, and men interrupt 96 percent of the time. From your own experience, do you follow these patterns? Do most of the people you talk with follow these patterns? Explain, also, your own responses to people who ask questions or who interrupt while you are having conversations with them.

“Women’s language” shows up in all levels of the grammar of English. We find differences in the choice and frequency of lexical items; in the situations in which certain syntactic rules are performed; in intonational and other supersegmental patterns. As an example of lexical differences, imagine a man and a woman both looking at the same wall, painted a pinkish shade of purple. The woman may say:

(1) The wall is mauve,

with no one consequently forming any special impression of her as a result of the words alone; but if the man should say (1), one might well conclude he was imitating a woman sarcastically or was a homosexual or an interior decorator. Women, then, make far more precise discriminations in naming colors than do men; words like *beige*, *ecru*, *aquamarine*, *lavender*, and so on are unremarkable in a woman’s active vocabulary, but absent from that of most men. I have seen a man helpless with suppressed laughter at a discussion between two other people as to whether a book jacket was to be described as

“lavender” or “mauve.” Men find such discussion amusing because they consider such a question trivial, irrelevant to the real world.

We might ask why fine discrimination of color is relevant for women, but not for men. A clue is contained in the way many men in our society view other “unworldly” topics, such as high culture and the Church, as outside the world of men’s work, relegated to women and men whose masculinity is not unquestionable. Men tend to relegate to women things that are not of concern to them, or do not involve their egos. Among these are problems of fine color discrimination. We might rephrase this point by saying that since women are not expected to make decisions on important matters, such as what kind of job to hold, they are relegated the noncrucial decisions as a sop. Deciding whether to name a color “lavender” or “mauve” is one such sop.

If it is agreed that this lexical disparity reflects a social inequity in the position of women, one may ask how to remedy it. Obviously, no one could seriously recommend legislating against the use of the terms “mauve” and “lavender” by women, or forcing men to learn to use them. All we can do is give women the opportunity to participate in the real decisions of life.

Aside from specific lexical items like color names, we find differences between the speech of women and that of men in the use of particles that grammarians often describe as “meaningless.” There may be no referent for them, but they are far from meaningless: they define the social context of an utterance, indicate the relationship the speaker feels between himself and his addressee, between himself and what he is talking about.

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As an experiment, one might present native speakers of standard American English with pairs of sentences, identical syntactically and in terms of referential lexical items, and differing merely in the choice of “meaningless” particles, and ask them which was spoken by a man, which a woman. Consider:

(2) (a)

Oh dear, you’ve put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again.

(b) Shit, you’ve put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again.

It is safe to predict that people would classify the first sentence as part of “women’s language,” the second as “men’s language.” It is true that many self-respecting women are becoming able to use sentences like (2)(b) publicly without flinching, but this is a relatively recent development, and while perhaps the majority of Middle America might condone the use of (b) for men, they would still disapprove of its use by women. (It is of interest, by the way, to note that men’s language is increasingly being used by women, but women’s language is not being adopted by men, apart from those who reject the American masculine image [for example, homosexuals]. This is analogous to the fact that men’s jobs are being sought by women, but few men are rushing to become housewives or secretaries. The language of the favored group, the group that holds the power, along with its nonlinguistic behavior, is generally adopted by the other group, not vice versa. In any event, it is a truism to state that the “stronger” expletives are reserved for men, and the “weaker” ones for women.)

Now we may ask what we mean by “stronger” and “weaker” expletives. (If these particles were indeed meaningless, none would be stronger than any other.) The

difference between using “shit” (or “damn,” or one of many others) as opposed to “oh dear,” or “goodness,” or “oh fudge” lies in how forcefully one says how one feels—perhaps, one might say, choice of particle is a function of how strongly one allows oneself to feel about something, so that the strength of an emotion conveyed in a sentence corresponds to the strength of the particle. Hence in a really serious situation, the use of “trivializing” (that is, “women’s”) particles constitutes a joke, or at any rate, is highly inappropriate. (In conformity with current linguistic practice, throughout this work an asterisk [{{??}}] will be used to mark a sentence that is inappropriate in some sense, either because it is syntactically deviant or used in the wrong social context.)

(3) (a)

{{??}} Oh fudge, my hair is on fire.

(b) {{??}} Dear me, did he kidnap the baby?

As children, women are encouraged to be “little ladies.” Little ladies don’t scream as vociferously as little boys, and they are chastised more severely for throwing tantrums or showing temper: “high spirits” are expected and therefore tolerated in little boys; docility and resignation are the corresponding traits expected of little girls. Now, we tend to excuse a show of temper by a man where we would not excuse an identical tirade from a woman: women are allowed to fuss and complain, but only a man can bellow in rage. It is sometimes claimed that there is a biological basis for this behavior difference, though I don’t believe conclusive evidence exists that the early differences in behavior that have been observed are not the results of very different treatment of babies of the two sexes from the beginning; but surely the use of different particles by men and women is a learned trait, merely mirroring nonlinguistic differences again, and again pointing out an inequity that exists between the treatment of men, and society’s expectations of them, and the treatment of women. Allowing men stronger means of expression than are open to women further reinforces men’s position of strength in the real world: for surely we listen with more attention the more strongly and forcefully someone expresses opinions, and a speaker unable—for whatever reason—to be forceful in stating his views is much less likely to be taken seriously. Ability to use strong particles like “shit” and “hell” is, of course, only incidental to the inequity that exists rather than its cause. But once again, apparently accidental linguistic usage suggests that women are denied equality partially for linguistic reasons, and that an examination of language points up precisely an area in which inequity exists. Further, if someone is allowed to show emotions, and consequently does, others may well be able to view him as a real individual in his own right, as they could not if he never showed emotion. Here again, then, the behavior a woman learns as “correct” prevents her from being taken seriously as an individual, and further is considered “correct” and necessary for a woman precisely because society does *not* consider her seriously as an individual.

Similar sorts of disparities exist elsewhere in the vocabulary. There is, for instance, a group of adjectives which have, besides their specific and literal meanings, another use, that of indicating the speaker’s approbation or admiration for something. Some of these adjectives are neutral as to sex of speaker: either men or women may use them. But another set seems, in its figurative use, to be largely confined to women’s speech. Representative lists of both types are below:

neutral

women only

great

terrific

cool

neat

adorable

charming

sweet

lovely

divine

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As with the color words and swear words already discussed, for a man to stray into the “women’s” column is apt to be damaging to his reputation, though here a woman may freely use the neutral words. But it should not be inferred from this that a woman’s use of the “women’s” words is without its risks. Where a woman has a choice between the neutral words and the women’s words, as a man has not, she may be suggesting very different things about her own personality and her view of the subject matter by her choice of words of the first set or words of the second.

(4) (a)

What a terrific idea!

(b) What a divine idea!

It seems to me that (a) might be used under any appropriate conditions by a female speaker. But (b) is more restricted. Probably it is used appropriately (even by the sort of speaker for whom it was normal) only in case the speaker feels the idea referred to be essentially frivolous, trivial, or unimportant to the world at large—only an amusement for the speaker herself. Consider, then, a woman advertising executive at an advertising conference. However feminine an advertising executive she is, she is much more likely to express her approval with (4)(a) than with (b), which might cause raised eyebrows, and the reaction: “That’s what we get for putting a woman in charge of this company.”

On the other hand, suppose a friend suggests to the same woman that she should dye her French poodles to match her cigarette lighter. In this case, the suggestion really concerns only her, and the impression she will make on people. In this case, she may use (b), from the “women’s language.” So the choice is not really free: words restricted to “women’s language” suggest that concepts to which they are applied are not relevant to the real world of (male) influence and power.

One may ask whether there really are no analogous terms that are available to men—terms that denote approval of the trivial, the personal; that express approbation in terms of one’s own personal emotional reaction, rather than by gauging the likely general reaction. There does in fact seem to be one such word: it is the hippie invention “groovy,” which seems to have most of the connotations that separate “lovely” and “divine” from “great” and “terrific” excepting only that it does not mark the speaker as feminine or effeminate.

(5) (a)

What a terrific steel mill!

(b) {{???}}What a lovely steel mill! (male speaking)

(c)

What a groovy steel mill!

I think it is significant that this word was introduced by the hippies, and, when used seriously rather than sarcastically, used principally by people who have accepted the hippies' values. Principal among these is the denial of the Protestant work ethic: to a hippie, something can be worth thinking about even if it isn't influential in the power structure, or moneymaking. Hippies are separated from the activities of the real world just as women are—though in the former case it is due to a decision on their parts, while this is not uncontroversially true in the case of women. For both these groups, it is possible to express approval of things in a personal way—though one does so at the risk of losing one's credibility with members of the power structure. It is also true, according to some speakers, that upper-class British men may use the words listed in the "women's" column, as well as the specific color words and others we have categorized as specifically feminine, without raising doubts as to their masculinity among other speakers of the same dialect. (This is not true for lower-class Britons, however.) The reason may be that commitment to the work ethic need not necessarily be displayed: one may be or appear to be a gentleman of leisure, interested in various pursuits, but not involved in mundane (business or political) affairs, in such a culture, without incurring disgrace. This is rather analogous to the position of a woman in American middle-class society, so we should not be surprised if these special lexical items are usable by both groups. This fact points indeed to a more general conclusion. These words aren't, basically, "feminine"; rather, they signal "uninvolved," or "out of power." Any group in a society to which these labels are applicable may presumably use these words; they are often considered "feminine," "unmasculine," because women are the "uninvolved," "out-of-power" group par excellence.

Another group that has, ostensibly at least, taken itself out of the search for power and money is that of academic men. They are frequently viewed by other groups as analogous in some ways to women—they don't really work, they are supported in their frivolous pursuits by others, what they do doesn't really count in the real world, and so on. The suburban home finds its counterpart in the ivory tower: one is supposedly shielded from harsh realities in both. Therefore it is not too surprising that many academic men (especially those who emulate British norms) may violate many of these sacrosanct rules I have just laid down: they often use "women's language." Among themselves, this does not occasion ridicule. But to a truck driver, a professor saying, "What a lovely hat!" is undoubtedly laughable, all the more so as it reinforces his stereotype of professors as effete snobs.

When we leave the lexicon and venture into syntax, we find that syntactically too women's speech is peculiar. To my knowledge, there is no syntactic rule in English that only women may use. But there is at least one rule that a woman will use in more conversational situations than a man. (This fact indicates, of course, that the applicability of syntactic rules is governed partly by social context—the positions in society of the

speaker and addressee, with respect to each other, and the impression one seeks to make on the other.) This is the rule of tag-question formation.¹

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A tag, in its usage as well as its syntactic shape (in English) is midway between an outright statement and a yes-no question: it is less assertive than the former, but more confident than the latter. Therefore it is usable under certain contextual situations: not those in which a statement would be appropriate, nor those in which a yes-no question is generally used, but in situations intermediate between these.

One makes a statement when one has confidence in his knowledge and is pretty certain that his statement will be believed; one asks a question when one lacks knowledge on some point and has reason to believe that this gap can and will be remedied by an answer by the addressee. A tag question, being intermediate between these, is used when the speaker is stating a claim, but lacks full confidence in the truth of that claim. So if I say:
(6) Is John here?

I will probably not be surprised if my respondent answers “no”; but if I say
(7) John is here, isn’t he?

instead, chances are I am already biased in favor of a positive answer, wanting only confirmation by the addressee. I still want a response from him, as I do with a yes-no question; but I have enough knowledge (or think I have) to predict that response, much as with a declarative statement. A tag question, then, might be thought of as a declarative statement without the assumption that the statement is to be believed by the addressee: one has an out, as with a question. A tag gives the addressee leeway, not forcing him to go along with the views of the speaker.

There are situations in which a tag is legitimate, in fact the only legitimate sentence form. So, for example, if I have seen something only indistinctly, and have reason to believe my addressee had a better view, I can say: (8) I had my glasses off. He was out at third, wasn’t he?

Sometimes we find a tag question used in cases in which the speaker knows as well as the addressee what the answer must be, and doesn’t need confirmation. One such situation is when the speaker is making “small talk,” trying to elicit conversation from the addressee:
(9) Sure is hot here, isn’t it?

In discussing personal feelings or opinions, only the speaker normally has any way of knowing the correct answer. Strictly speaking, questioning one’s own opinions is futile. Sentences like (10) are usually ridiculous.

(10) {{{}} I have a headache, don’t I?

But similar cases do, apparently, exist, in which it is the speaker’s opinions, rather than perceptions, for which corroboration is sought, as in (11):

(11) The way prices are rising is horrendous, isn’t it?

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While there are of course other possible interpretations of a sentence like this, one possibility is that the speaker has a particular answer in mind—"yes" or "no"—but is reluctant to state it baldly. It is my impression, though I do not have precise statistical evidence, that this sort of tag question is much more apt to be used by women than by men. If this is indeed true, why is it true? These sentence types provide a means whereby a speaker can avoid committing himself, and thereby avoid coming into conflict with the addressee. The problem is that, by so doing, a speaker may also give the impression of not being really sure of himself, of looking to the addressee for confirmation, even of having no views of his own. This last criticism is, of course, one often leveled at women. One wonders how much of it reflects a use of language that has been imposed on women from their earliest years.

Related to this special use of a syntactic rule is a widespread difference perceptible in women's intonational patterns.² There is a peculiar sentence intonation pattern, found in English as far as I know only among women, which has the form of a declarative answer to a question, and is used as such, but has the rising inflection typical of a yes-no question, as well as being especially hesitant. The effect is as though one were seeking confirmation, though at the same time the speaker may be the only one who has the requisite information.

(12) (a)

When will dinner be ready?

(b) Oh . . . around six o'clock . . . ?

It is as though (b) were saying, "Six o'clock, if that's OK with you, if you agree." (a) is put in the position of having to provide confirmation, and (b) sounds unsure. Here we find unwillingness to assert an opinion carried to an extreme. One likely consequence is that these sorts of speech patterns are taken to reflect something real about character and play a part in not taking a woman seriously or trusting her with any real responsibilities, since "she can't make up her mind" and "isn't sure of herself." And here again we see that people form judgments about other people on the basis of superficial linguistic behavior that may have nothing to do with inner character, but has been imposed upon the speaker, on pain of worse punishment than not being taken seriously.

Such features are probably part of the general fact that women's speech sounds much more "polite" than men's. One aspect of politeness is as we have just described: leaving a decision open, not imposing your mind, or views, or claims on anyone else. Thus a tag question is a kind of polite statement, in that it does not force agreement or belief on the addressee. A request may be in the same sense a polite command, in that it does not overtly require obedience, but rather suggests something be done as a favor to the speaker. An overt order (as in an imperative) expresses the (often impolite) assumption of the speaker's superior position to the addressee, carrying with it the right to enforce compliance, whereas with a request the decision on the face of it is left up to the addressee. (The same is true of suggestions: here, the implication is not that the addressee is in danger if he does not comply—merely that he will be glad if he does. Once again, the decision is up to the addressee, and a suggestion therefore is politer than an order.) The more particles in a sentence that reinforce the notion that it is a request, rather than an order, the politer the result. The sentences of (13) illustrate these points: (a) is a direct order, (b) and (c) simple requests, and (d) and (e) compound requests.³

(13) (a)

Close the door.

(b) Please close the door.

(c)

Will you close the door?

(d)

Will you please close the door?

(e)

Won't you close the door?

Let me first explain why (e) has been classified as a compound request. (A sentence like *Won't you please close the door* would then count as a doubly compound request.) A sentence like (13)(c) is close in sense to "Are you willing to close the door?" According to the normal rules of polite conversation, to agree that you are willing is to agree to do the thing asked of you. Hence this apparent inquiry functions as a request, leaving the decision up to the willingness of the addressee. Phrasing it as a positive question makes the (implicit) assumption that a "yes" answer will be forthcoming. Sentence (13)(d) is more polite than (b) or (c) because it combines them: *please* indicating that to accede will be to do something for the speaker, and *will you*, as noted suggesting that the addressee has the final decision. If, now, the question is phrased with a negative, as in (13)(e), the speaker seems to suggest the stronger likelihood of a negative response from the addressee. Since the assumption is then that the addressee is that much freer to refuse, (13)(e) acts as a more polite request than (13)(c) or (d); (c) and (d) put the burden of refusal on the addressee, as (e) does not.

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Given these facts, one can see the connection between tag questions and tag orders and other requests. In all these cases, the speaker is not committed as with a simple declarative or affirmative. And the more one compounds a request, the more characteristic it is of women's speech, the less of men's. A sentence that begins *Won't you please* (without special emphasis on *please*) seems to me at least to have a distinctly unmasculine sound. Little girls are indeed taught to talk like little ladies, in that their speech is in many ways more polite than that of boys or men, and the reason for this is that politeness involves an absence of a strong statement, and women's speech is devised to prevent the expression of strong statements.

Suggestions for Writing and Discussion

1.

Explain Lakoff's main point regarding the contrast in language between men and women. What is your response to this point?

2.

Throughout this piece, many statements sound as if they are "begging the question" (a statement presented as factual and true, although it still "begs" for supporting evidence). Examine each of the following examples, and determine whether or not the statement needs further evidence in order to be true:

a.

"Men tend to relegate to women things that are not of concern to them, or do not involve their egos."

b.

“As children, women are encouraged to be ‘little ladies.’”

c.

“For surely we listen with more attention the more strongly and forcefully someone expresses opinions.”

d.

“The suburban home finds its counterpart in the ivory tower: one is supposedly shielded from harsh realities in both.”

e.

“One asks a question when one lacks knowledge on some point and has reason to believe that this gap can and will be remedied by an answer by the addressee.”

3.

By showing the commonality of language between women and hippies, women and British aristocrats, and women and male academics, what is Lakoff implying?

4.

Although Lakoff doesn't come out and state what she advocates for women, what do you think she might like to see happen as far as women's language is concerned?

5.

Choose just one paragraph from this piece and evaluate it in terms of word choice, tone, sentence structure, and syntax. What can you conclude regarding Lakoff's tone and interaction with the audience in this section? Would you say that this paragraph is reflective of the overall tone of this piece?

6.

What type of audience might be most receptive to this essay? Explain your answer.

<wumh>Suggestions for Extended Thinking and Writing

1.

Write an essay in which you argue that instead of women becoming more assertive, society would be better served if men adopted women's patterns in language.

2.

Record several observations of the interactions of men and women in one specific setting: a college classroom, a singles' bar, a library, a supermarket, a sporting match, a restaurant, a living room. After taking careful notes, write an essay in which you draw conclusions about the way each group uses language. Do your findings support Lakoff's work, contradict her main points, or reveal something new?

PETER FARB

Linguistic Chauvinism

Peter Farb has served as curator for American Indian Cultures at Riverside Museum in New York City. “Linguistic Chauvinism” is an excerpt from his widely acclaimed book Word Play: What Happens When People Talk, published in 1974.

Suggestions for Prereading or Journal Writing

1.

Part I: How does an audience affect the way we write? In order to find out, think about the most disturbing thing that happened to you this past week. Then write three different letters about this event to three different audiences from the following list.

Your best friend
Your mother or father
Your teacher
Your preacher

The mail carrier
A casual acquaintance or
co-worker
An intimate friend or your
spouse
Your son or daughter

Part II: After writing these three versions, describe how considering your audience changes or affects the way you communicate.

2.

Every family or generation has its share of peculiar sayings or slang expressions. Write about some of the expressions common in your family or generation, and explain to an outsider exactly what these terms mean.

What we hear today as Black English is probably the result of five major influences: African languages; West African pidgin; a Plantation Creole once spoken by slaves in the southern United States as well as by blacks as far north as Canada; Standard English; and, finally, urbanization in the northern ghettos. The influence of African languages on black speech was long denied, until in 1949 Lorenzo Dow Turner published the results of his fifteen-year study of Gullah, a black dialect spoken in the coastal region around Charleston, South Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia. Gullah is important in the history of Black English because this region continued to receive slaves direct from Africa as late as 1858—and so any influence from Africa would be expected to survive there longer. Turner accumulated compelling evidence of resemblances in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar between Gullah and various West African languages. He listed some 4,000 Gullah words for personal names, numbers, and objects that are derived directly from African languages. Some of these words—such as *tote*, *chigger*, *yam*, and *tater* (“potato”)—eventually entered Standard English.

The second influence, pidginization, is more apparent because the languages spoken today by the descendants of slaves almost everywhere in the New World—regardless of whether these languages were based on English, French, Dutch, Spanish, or Portuguese—share similarities in sound patterns and in grammar. For example, the common Black English construction *He done close the door* has no direct equivalent in Standard English, but it is similar to structures found in Portuguese Pidgin, Weskos of West Africa, French Creole of Haiti, the Shanan Creole of Surinam, and so on. An analysis of the speech of slaves—as recorded in eighteenth-century letters, histories, and books of travel—indicates that the great majority of them in the continental United States spoke pidgin English, as much in the North as in the South. This was to be expected since blacks speaking many languages were thrown together in the West African slave factories and they had to develop some means of communication. No matter what their mother tongues

were, they had been forced to learn a second language, an African Pidgin English that at least as early as 1719 had been spread around the world by the slave trade. We can be certain of that year because it marked the publication of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, which contains numerous examples of this pidgin and also uses, in the character Friday, the West African and slave tradition of bestowing personal names based on the days of the week.

Therefore most slaves must have arrived in the New World speaking a pidgin that enabled them to communicate with each other and eventually also with their overseers. In the succeeding generations a small number of blacks were taught Standard English. But the great majority apparently expanded their pidgin into a creole language—called Plantation Creole by some linguists even though it was also spoken in the North—by grafting an English vocabulary onto the structures of their native languages and pidgins. This creole probably began to develop as soon as the first generation of slaves was born in the New World. Cotton Mather and other writers record its use in Massachusetts: the writings of T. C. Haliburton (creator of the humorous Yankee character Sam Slick) show that it reached as far north as Halifax, Nova Scotia; Harriet Beecher Stowe attests to its use in New York and Benjamin Franklin to its presence in Philadelphia. Emancipation did not do away with Plantation Creole. In fact, it spread its use to the offspring of the former house slaves who had been taught Standard English. That is because segregated schools and racial isolation after the Civil War caused the great number of speakers of Plantation Creole to linguistically overwhelm the small number of black speakers of Standard English. Nevertheless, the fourth step—a process known as decreolization—has been constantly at work as blacks tend to move closer in speech to the Standard English they hear all around them. The final step in the creation of the Black English known today was the surge of blacks into northern ghettos. The ghetto experience placed the final stamp on Black English by mixing various kinds of Plantation Creole, filtering out some features and emphasizing others. Variations are apparent in the Black English spoken locally in such cities as Baltimore, New York, Detroit, Chicago, and Los Angeles, but these variations are minor in comparison to the major differences between Black English in general and Standard English.

I would need an entire volume to discuss these differences adequately, but let me at least point out a few of them. Black English does not sound like Standard English because it often uses different sounds. In the case of vowels, groups of words like *find-found-fond* and *pen-pin* are pronounced almost exactly alike. The distinctive sounds of Black English, though, result more from the pronunciation of the consonants. *Th* at the beginning of a word is often pronounced either *d*, as in *dey*, or *t*, as in *tink*; in the middle of a word or at the end, *th* often becomes *v* or *f*, with the result that *father* is pronounced *faver* and *mouth* is pronounced *mouf*. Black English dispenses with *r* to an even greater extent than the Standard speech heard along the eastern coast of North America. It not only loses the *r* after vowels and at the end of words, as do some Standard dialects which pronounce *sore* and *saw* in the same way, but in addition it dispenses with *r* between vowels, thus making *Paris* and *pass* sound alike. *L* also is almost completely lost except when it begins a word, with the result that no distinction is made between such pairs of words as *help-hep* and *toll-toe*. Final clusters of consonants are nearly always simplified by the loss of one of the consonants, usually *t* or *d* but often *s* or *z* as well, with the result that *meant-mend-men*, *start-started*, and *give-gives* are pronounced in the same way.

Some linguists have stated that Black English grammar resulted simply from the loss of the consonant sounds that carry much of the burden of forming suffixes in Standard English. The absence of verb tenses, for example, was attributed to the loss of *d* (as when *burned* becomes *burn* ') or *l* (as when *I'll go* becomes *I go*). The statement in Black English *He workin'* was long thought to be the same as the Standard *He's working*, except that black pronunciation dropped the *s* in the contraction of the verb *is*. But it now appears that the structure of Black English is much more complicated than the mere loss of suffixes due to a failure to pronounce them.

The black speaker is apparently using a different grammar, which disregards *is* in the Standard *He's working* and instead chooses to emphasize the auxiliary verb *be*. *He be workin'* means that the person referred to has been working continuously for a long time; but *He workin'*, without the *be*, means that the person is working now, at this very moment. A speaker of Black English would no more say *He be workin' right now* (that is, use the habitual *be* to tell about something happening only at this moment) than a speaker of Standard English would say *He is sleeping tomorrow* (that is, ignore the tense of the verb). The use and non-use of the auxiliary *be* is clearly seen in the Black English sentence *You makin' sense, but you don't be makin' sense*—which in Standard English means “You just said something smart, but you don't habitually say anything smart.” The speaker of Black English, therefore, is obliged by his language to mark certain kinds of verbs as describing either momentary action or habitual action. In contrast, the speaker of Standard English is not obliged to make this distinction—although he must make others which speakers of Black English ignore, such as the tense of the verb.

Black English also differs considerably from Standard English in the various ways in which negative statements are structured. The Black English *He ain't go* is not simply the equivalent of the Standard *He didn't go*. The speaker of Black English is not using *ain't* as a past tense, but rather to express the negative for the momentary act of going, whether it happened in the past or is happening right now. If the Black English speaker, on the other hand, wants to speak of someone who is habitually the kind of person who does not go, he would say *He ain't goin'*. *Ain't* also serves several other functions in Black English. *Dey ain't like dat* might be thought by speakers of Standard to mean “They aren't like that”—but it actually means “They didn't like that,” because in this usage *ain't* is the negative of the auxiliary verb *to do*. *Ain't* can also emphasize a negation by doubling it, as in *He ain't no rich*. And in what would be a negative *if*-clause in Standard English, the rules of Black English eliminate the *if* and invert the verb—with the result that the equivalent of the Standard *He doesn't know if she can go* is the Black English *He don't know can she go*.

I have touched on merely a few of the obvious differences between the rules of Black English and the rules of Standard English in regard to verbs. Numerous other aspects of Black English verbs could be discussed—such as *I done go*, *I done gone*, *I been done gone*, and *I done been gone*. Or I could mention other constructions, such as the possessive case, in which I could demonstrate that *John book* in Black English is a different kind of possessive than *John's book* is in Standard English. But by now it should be apparent that important differences exist between the two dialects.

The wonder is that it took people so long to realize that Black English is neither a mispronunciation of Standard English nor an accumulation of random errors made in the

grammar of Standard. Utterances in Black English are grammatically consistent and they are generated by rules in the same way that utterances in Standard English are generated by rules. Miss Fidditch may not regard utterances in Black English to be “good English”—but that is beside the point, because Black English is using a different set of rules than those of Standard English.

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In addition to pronunciation and grammatical distinctions, Black English differs from Standard in the way language is used in the speech community. Black speakers generally place much more emphasis on effective talking than do white speakers, and they are immersed in verbal stimulation throughout the day to a considerably greater extent than middle-class whites. Playing the dozens is only one of the numerous speech events which depend upon the competitive exhibition of verbal skills in the ghetto. Rapping, jiving, rifting, louding, and toasting are other verbal ways in which the black achieves status in his community. Whereas a white is apt to feel embarrassed when he repeats himself, a black feels he has the license to repeat whatever he is saying, sometimes from the very beginning. And he expects to evoke a feedback from his audience that not only permits him to continue talking but also urges him to do so by such expressions of audience approval as *right on* or *amen*. Status within the black community is sometimes determined by one’s material or spiritual attributes, but it is almost always determined by a speaker’s ability to demonstrate his command over the different uses of language. Speech is, in fact, regarded as a performance in which the speaker is continually on stage. His verbal behavior is appraised by the standards of performance as being either *cool* or *lame*—and not by the white standards of tactful conversation.

The sharing of much the same vocabulary camouflages basic differences between Black and Standard English. And that is why most school systems are unaware that lower-class black children enter the first grade speaking a mother dialect that is not Standard English. The exasperated white teacher, who knows little about Black English, usually concludes that the black child is unteachable because he refuses to learn to read the simple English of his mother tongue. The teacher reprimands the black child for saying *they toys* and *He work* when he clearly sees printed in his reader *their toys* and *He’s working*. Actually, the black child should be commended for his quickness in translating Standard English symbols on the printed page into his own dialect, Black English.

The black child’s ability to read Black English, even though he may fail in reading Standard, is supported by an incident that happened to William A. Stewart, of the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C. He was in the process of translating “The Night Before Christmas” into Black English, ignoring Black English pronunciation but otherwise using Black English grammar:

It’s the night before Christmas, and all through the house
Ain’t nobody moving, not even a mouse.
There go them stocking, hanging up on the wall.
So Santa Claus can full them up, if he pay our house a call.

While he was working on the translation, a ten-year-old black girl, who was regarded in her school as having a reading problem, glanced over his shoulder. With great speed and accuracy, she read aloud what Stewart had written. But when he asked her to read the same lines in the original Standard English form, she failed miserably. Clearly, the girl

could read perfectly well—not Standard English, but the language of her mother dialect, Black English.

Experiences such as this one have led some linguists to advocate teaching ghetto children the rules of Standard English as if they were learning a foreign language. But Stewart would go even further. He wants black children to be taught to read Black English first, so that the words and structures they see on the printed page would correspond directly to the daily speech they hear in their community. He argues that once the child has mastered the principle of reading the tongue in which he is fluent, he will find it comparatively easy to make the transition to the Standard. To that end he has produced several readers in parallel Black and Standard versions, one of which, *Ollie*, contains such sentences as: Ollie big sister, she name La Verne. La Verne grown up now, and she ain't scared of nobody. But that don't mean she don't never be scared. The other day when she in the house, La Verne she start to screaming and hollering. Didn't nobody know what was the matter.

If the black child survives the trauma of school—and most black children do not, because of the problem in the early years of learning to read that strange dialect, Standard English—he will have become, in effect, bilingual in two dialects that use English words. And, like most bilinguals, he will have to employ the strategy of language-switching. But whereas someone in Paraguay has to know only when to speak either Spanish or Guarani, the black must know the two extremes of Black English and Standard English, as well as the many gradations in between. The expert dialect-switcher can quickly place his speech somewhere along the spectrum ranging from Black English to Standard English, depending upon whom he is talking to: upper-class white, lower-class white, educated black, lower-class black, recent black migrant from the South, family and close friends, and so on. It is a formidable linguistic accomplishment.

15

The problems faced by the bilingual black speaker are the same as those faced by American-born children of immigrant parents who enter school knowing Spanish, Italian, Greek, Yiddish, Polish, Hungarian, or other foreign languages—with one important difference. Teachers feel that the white children speak real languages, languages with their own dictionaries and literature, and therefore the teachers are likely to be patient in starting at the beginning when teaching these children English. But few teachers display the same sympathy toward the black child who speaks a language that they believe is the same as their own, the only difference being that the black child speaks it carelessly and stubbornly refuses to be grammatical. Often black teachers themselves are the worst offenders in stigmatizing Black English. They struggled for an education and put tremendous effort into learning to speak Standard English. Obviously, they view as inferior that speech which they worked so hard to unlearn in themselves.

The native languages of Africa were suppressed long ago, in the slave factories and on the plantations, but pressure against the numerous foreign languages spoken by immigrants to the United States did not begin until after the First World War. That was when many native-born Americans considered “Americanization” and “the melting-pot philosophy” to be the alchemy that would transmute the “baser” languages of immigrants into the golden American tongue. Americanization placed a special emphasis on extirpating the languages of the immigrants, for the obvious reason that language carries

the culture of its speakers. Get rid of the language—and the nation has also rid itself of the alien’s instrument of perception, his means of expressing foreign values, his maintenance of a culture transported from another continent. Theodore Roosevelt’s statement in 1919 is typical of the Americanization position:

We have room for but one language here and that is the English language, for we intend to see that the crucible turns our people out as Americans and not as dwellers in a polyglot boarding house.

The Americanization movement reached its height in the 1930s, but its effects continue to be felt. Every census since then has revealed that fewer Americans claim a non-English mother tongue. And even those who acknowledge their bilingualism do so with a feeling that they have traitorously maintained an alien way of life. The crime of Americanization is that it convinced those whose tongues were stigmatized that they were deserving of the stigma.

Other people, though, regard the maintenance of a diversity of languages as a source of strength for the nation. They recall that English is not an indigenous language of America, that it was merely one of the languages exported to the New World by colonial powers. Opponents of Americanization also point out that no nation in the world speaks only one language. Even France, which comes closest to the uniformity of a single national language, has German speakers in Alsace-Lorraine, Breton speakers in Brittany, Basque speakers in the Pyrenees, and Provençal speakers in the south.

The simple truth is that a culturally diversified society is a vital one and affords maximum freedom for creativity and achievement. But if a practical benefit of linguistic diversity is needed, then it can be found in the fact that non-English speakers in America provide a natural resource that both in war and in peace has met national needs. Millions of Americans were shamed into losing their foreign-language competence at the very time that the federal and local governments spent vast amounts of money to increase the teaching of foreign languages in schools.

It is as dispiriting to hear a language die as it is to stand idly by and watch the bald eagle, the whooping crane, or any other form of life disappear from the face of the earth. The supporters of linguistic diversity do not propose a return to the curse of Babel; they do not urge a world fragmented into groups that are unable to communicate. Instead, linguistic sciences can possibly achieve the best of two worlds.

Suggestions for Writing and Discussion

1.

What, exactly, is the meaning of *chauvinism*? How does this word connect to Farb’s main point in this piece? Use a dictionary as you work on your response to this question.

2.

According to Farb, how do the structures and purposes of black language differ from those of standard American?

3.

Because Farb is a linguistic scholar, his insights into the black language far exceed those of the average person. What did you learn by reading this piece? What information surprised you? What questions would you like to be able to ask Farb in person?

4.

From a linguist's standpoint, Farb contends that many black children do not survive the "trauma of school" because of their difficulty reading and using standard English. Other than language difficulties, can you see any factors that may contribute to the trauma of school for some of these black children? Are any of these factors more important than Farb's language issue? Explain your answer.

5.

Farb concludes that unless a language is acknowledged in its own right, it will not survive. What evidence does Farb give to support this claim? Do you agree or disagree with him on this point? Explain your position.

6.

Evaluate the general appeal that Farb adopts in this piece. Find five specific words, phrases, or passages that support your claim. As a writer, why might Farb choose this approach over any other? Explain your answer.

7.

Do you agree with Farb? Should public schools accommodate the language of black students? If so, explain what points were most convincing in this piece. If not, explain what points you disagree with, and give your counterargument in its place.

Suggestions for Extended Thinking and Writing

1.

Research in greater depth the languages of Gullah, Pidgin, or Creole. Write an essay in which you further explain one or two of the basic points Farb makes in this piece.

2.

Analyze a popular rap song in terms of the major points Farb makes in this piece.

RACHEL L. JONES

What's Wrong with Black English?

When Rachel Jones was a sophomore at Southern Illinois University, she wrote this essay, which originally appeared in Newsweek's "My Turn" column in 1982. She offers a view of black English that is very different from Peter Farb's (pages 474–480).

Suggestions for Prereading or Journal Writing

1.

As far as your choices for speaking are concerned, explain how you alter your way of speaking depending on the audience, the place, and the circumstance. Try to write about a specific incident that happened this past week.

2.

Are there any words or phrases in standard English that you usually refrain from using? Why do you exclude these words from your everyday vocabulary? What conclusions can you draw about the ways in which you use language?

William Labov, a noted linguist, once said about the use of black English, "It is the goal of most black Americans to acquire full control of the standard language without giving up their own culture." He also suggested that there are certain advantages to having two ways to express one's feelings. I wonder if the good doctor might also consider the goals of those black Americans who have full control of standard English but who are every

now and then troubled by that colorful, grammar-to-the-winds patois that is black English. Case in point—me.

I'm a 21-year-old black born to a family that would probably be considered lower-middle class—which in my mind is a polite way of describing a condition only slightly better than poverty. Let's just say we rarely if ever did the winter-vacation thing in the Caribbean. I've often had to defend my humble beginnings to a most unlikely group of people for an even less likely reason. Because of the way I talk, some of my black peers look at me sideways and ask, "Why do you talk like you're white?"

The first time it happened to me I was nine years old. Cornered in the school bathroom by the class bully and her sidekick, I was offered the opportunity to swallow a few of my teeth unless I satisfactorily explained why I always got good grades, why I talked "proper" or "white." I had no ready answer for her, save the fact that my mother had from the time I was old enough to talk stressed the importance of reading and learning, or that L. Frank Baum and Ray Bradbury were my closest companions. I read all my older brothers' and sisters' literature textbooks more faithfully than they did, and even lightweights like the Bobbsey Twins and Trixie Belden were allowed into my bookish inner circle. I don't remember exactly what I told those girls, but I somehow talked my way out of a beating.

"White Pipes"

I was reminded once again of my "white pipes" problem while apartment hunting in Evanston, Ill., last winter. I doggedly made out lists of available places and called all around. I would immediately be invited over—and immediately turned down. The thinly concealed looks of shock when the front door opened clued me in, along with the flustered instances of "just getting off the phone with the girl who was ahead of you and she wants the rooms." When I finally found a place to live, my roommate stirred up old memories when she remarked a few months later, "You know, I was surprised when I first saw you. You sounded white over the phone." Tell me another one, sister.

5

I should've asked her a question I've wanted an answer to for years: how does one "talk white"? The silly side of me pictures a rabid white foam spewing forth when I speak. I don't use Valley Girl jargon, so that's not what's meant in my case. Actually, I've pretty much deduced what people mean when they say that to me, and the implications are really frightening.

It means that I'm articulate and well-versed. It means that I can talk as freely about John Steinbeck as I can about Rick James. It means that "ain't" and "he be" are not staples of my vocabulary and are only used around family and friends. (It is almost Jekyll and Hyde-ish the way I can slip out of academic abstractions into a long, lean, double-negative-filled dialogue, but I've come to terms with that aspect of my personality.) As a child, I found it hard to believe that's what people meant by "talking proper"; that would've meant that good grades and standard English were equated with white skin, and that went against everything I'd ever been taught. Running into the same type of mentality as an adult has confirmed the depressing reality that for many blacks, standard English is not only unfamiliar, it is socially unacceptable.

James Baldwin once defended black English by saying it had added "vitality to the language," and even went so far as to label it a language in its own right, saying, "Language [i.e., black English] is a political instrument" and a "vivid and crucial key to

identity.” But did Malcolm X urge blacks to take power in this country “any way y’all can”? Did Martin Luther King Jr. say to blacks, “I has been to the mountaintop, and I done seed the Promised Land”? Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and James Baldwin did not achieve their eloquence, grace and stature by using only black English in their writing. Andrew Young, Tom Bradley and Barbara Jordan did not acquire political power by saying, “Y’all crazy if you ain’t gon vote for me.” They all have full command of standard English, and I don’t think that knowledge takes away from their blackness or commitment to black people.

Soulful

I know from experience that it’s important for black people, stripped of culture and heritage, to have something they can point to and say, “This is ours, *we* can comprehend it, *we* alone can speak it with a soulful flourish.” I’d be lying if I said that the rhythms of my people caught up in “some serious rap” don’t sound natural and right to me sometimes. But how heartwarming is it for those same brothers when they hit the pavement searching for employment? Studies have proven that the use of ethnic dialects decreases power in the marketplace. “I be” is acceptable on the corner, but not with the boss. Am I letting capitalistic, European-oriented thinking fog the issue? Am I selling out blacks to an ideal of assimilating, being as much like white as possible? I have not formed a personal political ideology, but I do know this: it hurts me to hear black children use black English, knowing that they will be at yet another disadvantage in an educational system already full of stumbling blocks. It hurts me to sit in lecture halls and hear fellow black students complain that the professor “be tripping dem out using big words dey can’t understand.” And what hurts most is to be stripped of my own blackness simply because I know my way around the English language.

10

I would have to disagree with Labov in one respect. My goal is not so much to acquire full control of both standard and black English, but to one day see more black people less dependent on a dialect that excludes them from full participation in the world we live in. I don’t think I talk white, I think I talk right.

Suggestions for Writing and Discussion

1.

What, exactly, is Jones’s viewpoint as far as black English is concerned? How does she support this claim?

2.

In what ways might Jones’s position as a college student affect the way readers view her main premises? If she was a student in a class taught by Peter Farb (author of “Linguistic Chauvinism,” pages 474–480), on what specific points might she disagree with her instructor?

3.

Why does Jones include her family background in this piece? How would the effect of the essay be different if this information were excluded? Explain your answer.

4.

How does Jones’s preferred choice of dialect connect her to or disconnect her from other cultures?

5.

Jones indicates that her literacy stems from white writers only. Explain why she may have read only popular white fiction. If she had also read black writers, might her ideas on language be any different? Explain your answer.

6.

Why does Jones include the language used by famous black leaders and writers in America, past and present? What does she gain by using these specific people as examples? Can you think of any influential black people who do not fit into her category?

7.

Do you think Jones's piece would be convincing to black students today? What points might be more convincing than others? Why?

Suggestion for Extended Thinking and Writing

Observe the portrayal of language on a popular television sitcom in which the main characters are black. Do these characters conform to Jones's white English dialect, or do they use the black English she describes? If you were Jones, how would you react to the way language is used in this show?

GISH JEN

What Means Switch

An American with Chinese roots, Gish Jen grew up in Scarsdale, New York, and was educated at Harvard, Stanford, and the Iowa Writers Workshop. She has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the James Michener/Copernicus Society, the Bunting Institute, and the Massachusetts Artists' Foundation. Her work has appeared in many magazines and collections, including the New Yorker, the Atlantic Monthly, and The Best American Short Stories 1988. She is the author of a widely acclaimed novel depicting the life of contemporary Chinese immigrants, Typical Americans (1991). The story "What Means Switch" first appeared in the Atlantic in 1990.

Suggestions for Prereading or Journal Writing

1.

When you were an adolescent, what kinds of things did you do in order to fit in with a particular group? Were you successful? Try to freewrite about one time in which you changed (or refused to change) in some way in order to be accepted.

2.

If you had to choose one of the following to be the most important relationship in your life, which one would it be and why?

a.

You and your friends

b.

You and your family

c.

b. You and your community

There we are, nice Chinese family—father, mother, two born-here girls. Where should we live next? My parents slide the question back and forth like a cup of ginseng neither

one wants to drink. Until finally it comes to them, what they really want is a milkshake (chocolate) and to go with it a house in Scarsdale. What else? The broker tries to hint: the neighborhood, she says. Moneyed. Many delis. Meaning rich and Jewish. But someone has sent my parents a list of the top ten schools nation-wide (based on the opinion of selected educators and others) and so *many-deli* or not we nestle into a Dutch colonial on the Bronx River Parkway. The road's windy where we are, very charming; drivers miss their turns, plough up our flower beds, then want to use our telephone. "Of course," my mom tells them, like it's no big deal, we can replant. We're the type to adjust. You know—the lady drivers weep, my mom gets out the Kleenex for them. We're a bit down the hill from the private plane set, in other words. Only in our dreams do our jacket zippers jam, what with all the lift tickets we have stapled to them, Killington on top of Sugarbush on top of Stowe, and we don't even know where the Virgin Islands are—although certain of us do know that virgins are like priests and nuns, which there were a lot more of in Yonkers, where we just moved from, than there are here.

This is my first understanding of class. In our old neighborhood everybody knew everything about virgins and non-virgins, not to say the technicalities of staying in-between. Or almost everybody, I should say; in Yonkers I was the laugh-along type. Here I'm an expert.

"You mean the man . . . ?" Pig-tailed Barbara Gugelstein spits a mouthful of coke back into her can. "That is *so* gross!"

Pretty soon I'm getting popular for a new girl, the only problem is Danielle Meyers, who wears blue mascara and has gone steady with two boys. "How do *you* know," she starts to ask, proceeding to edify us all with how she French-kissed one boyfriend and just regular kissed another. ("Because, you know, he had braces.") We hear about his rubber bands, how once one popped right into her mouth. I begin to realize I need to find somebody to kiss too. But how? I can't do mascara—my eyelashes stick together. Plus, as Danielle the Great Educator points out, I'm *Chinese*.

5

Luckily, I just about then happen to tell Barbara Gugelstein I know karate. I don't know why I tell her this. My sister, Callie, is the liar in the family; ask anybody. I'm the one who doesn't see why we should have to hold our heads up. But for some reason I tell Barbara Gugelstein I can make my hands like steel by thinking hard. "I'm not supposed to tell anyone," I say. The way she backs away, blinking, I could be the burning bush.

"I can't do bricks," I say—a bit of expectation management. "But I can do your arm if you want." I set my hand in chop position.

"Uhh, it's okay," she says. "I know you can, I saw it on TV last night."

That's when I recall that I too saw it on TV last night—in fact, at her house. I rush on to tell her I know how to get pregnant with tea.

10

"With *tea*?"

"That's how they do it in China."

She agrees that China is an ancient and great civilization that ought to be known for more than spaghetti and gunpowder. I tell her I know Chinese. "*Be-yeh fa-foon*," I say. "*Shee-veh. Ji nu*." Meaning, "Stop acting crazy. Rice gruel. Soy sauce." She's impressed. At lunch the next day, Danielle Meyers and Amy Weinstein and Barbara's crush, Andy Kaplan, are all impressed too. Scarsdale is a liberal town, not like Yonkers, where the

Whitman Road Gang used to throw crabapple mash at my sister Callie and me and tell us it would make our eyes stick shut. Here we're like permanent exchange students. In another ten years, there'll be so many Orientals we'll turn into Asians; a Japanese grocery will buy out that one deli too many. But for now, the mid-sixties, what with civil rights on TV, we're not so much accepted as embraced. Especially by the Jewish part of town—which, it turns out, is not all of town at all. That's just an idea people have, Callie says, and lots of them could take us or leave us same as the Christians, who are nice too; I shouldn't generalize. So let me not generalize except to say that pretty soon I've been to so many bar and bas mitzvahs, I can almost say myself whether the kid chants like an angel or like a train conductor, maybe they could use him on the commuter line. At seder I know to forget the bricks, get a good pile of that mortar. Also I know what is schmaltz. I know that I am a goy. This is not why people like me, though. People like me because I do not need to use deodorant, as I demonstrate in the locker room before and after gym. Also, I can explain to them, for example, what is tofu (*der-voe*, we say at home). Their mothers invite me to taste-test their Chinese cooking.

"Very authentic." I try to be reassuring. After all, they're nice people, I like them. "Delish." I have seconds. On the question of what we eat, though, I have to admit, "Well, no, it's different than that." I have thirds. "What my mom makes is home style, it's not in the cookbooks."

Not in the cookbooks! Everyone's jealous. Meanwhile, the big deal at home is when we have turkey pot pie. My sister Callie's the one introduced them—Mrs. Wilder's, they come in this green-and-brown box—and when we have them, we both get suddenly interested in helping out in the kitchen. You know, we stand in front of the oven and help them bake. Twenty-five minutes. She and I have a deal, though, to keep it secret from school, as everybody else thinks they're gross. We think they're a big improvement over authentic Chinese home cooking. Ox-tail soup—now that's gross. Stir-fried beef with tomatoes. One day I say, "You know Ma, I have never seen a stir-fried tomato in any Chinese restaurant we have ever been in, ever."

15

"In China," she says, real lofty, "we consider tomatoes are a delicacy."

"Ma," I say. "Tomatoes are *Italian*."

"No respect for elders." She wags her finger at me, but I can tell it's just to try and shame me into believing her. "I'm tell you, tomatoes *invented* in China."

"Ma."

"Is true. Like noodles. Invented in China."

20

"That's not what they said in *school*."

"In *China*," my mother counters, "we also eat tomatoes uncooked, like apple. And in summertime we slice them, and put some sugar on top."

"Are you sure?"

My mom says of course she's sure, and in the end I give in, even though she once told me that China was such a long time ago, a lot of things she can hardly remember. She said sometimes she has trouble remembering her characters, that sometimes she'll be writing a letter, just writing along, and all of sudden she won't be sure if she should put four dots or three.

"So what do you do then?"

25

“Oh, I just make a little sloppy.”

“You mean you *fudge*?”

She laughed then, but another time, when she was showing me how to write my name, and I said, just kidding, “Are you sure that’s the right number of dots now?” she was hurt.

“I mean, of course you know,” I said. “I mean, *oy*.”

Meanwhile, what *I* know is that in the eighth grade, what people want to hear does not include how Chinese people eat sliced tomatoes with sugar on top. For a gross fact, it just isn’t gross enough. On the other hand, the fact that somewhere in China somebody eats or has eaten or once ate living monkey brains—now that’s conversation.

30

“They have these special tables,” I say, “kind of like a giant collar. With a hole in the middle, for the monkey’s neck. They put the monkey in the collar, and then they cut off the top of its head.”

“Whadda they use for cutting?”

I think. “Scalpels.”

“*Scalpels?*” says Andy Kaplan.

“Kaplan, don’t be dense,” Barbara Gugelstein says. “The Chinese *invented* scalpels.”

35

Once a friend said to me, You know, everybody is valued for something. She explained how some people resented being valued for their looks; others resented being valued for their money. Wasn’t it still better to be beautiful and rich than ugly and poor, though? You should be just glad, she said, that you have something people value. It’s like having a special talent, like being good at ice-skating, or opera-singing. She said, You could probably make a career out of it.

Here’s the irony: I am.

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Anyway. I am ad-libbing my way through eighth grade, as I’ve described. Until one bloomy spring day, I come in late to homeroom, and to my chagrin discover there’s a new kid in class.

Chinese.

So what should I do, pretend to have to go to the girls’ room, like Barbara Gugelstein the day Andy Kaplan took his ID back? I sit down; I am so cool I remind myself of Paul Newman. First thing I realize, though, is that no one looking at me is thinking of Paul Newman. The notes fly:

40

“I think he’s cute.”

“Who?” I write back. (I am still at an age, understand, when I believe a person can be saved by aplomb.)

“I don’t think he talks English too good. Writes it either.”

“Who?”

“They might have to put him behind a grade, so don’t worry.”

45

“He has a crush on you already, you could tell as soon as you walked in, he turned kind of orangish.”

I hope I'm not turning orangish as I deal with my mail, I could use a secretary. The second round starts:

"What do you mean who? Don't be weird. Didn't you *see* him???" Straight back over your right shoulder!!!!"

I have to look; what else can I do? I think of certain tips I learned in Girl Scouts about poise. I cross my ankles. I hold a pen in my hand. I sit up as though I have a crown on my head. I swivel my head slowly, repeating to myself, *I could be Miss America.*

"Miss Mona Chang."

50

Horror raises its hoary head.

"Notes, please."

Mrs. Mandeville's policy is to read all notes aloud.

I try to consider what Miss America would do, and see myself, back straight, knees together, crying. Some inspiration. Cool Hand Luke, on the other hand, would, quick, eat the evidence. And why not? I should yawn as I stand up, and boom, the notes are gone.

All that's left is to explain that it's an old Chinese reflex.

I shuffle up to the front of the room.

55

"One minute please," Mrs. Mandeville says.

I wait, noticing how large and plastic her mouth is.

She unfolds a piece of paper.

And I, Miss Mona Chang, who got almost straight A's her whole life except in math and conduct, am about to start crying in front of everyone.

I am delivered out of hot Egypt by the bell. General pandemonium. Mrs. Mandeville still has her hand clamped on my shoulder, though. And the next thing I know, I'm holding the new boy's schedule. He's standing next to me like a big blank piece of paper. "This is Sherman," Mrs. Mandeville says.

60

"Hello," I say.

"*Non how a,*" I say.

I'm glad Barbara Gugelstein isn't there to see my Chinese in action.

"*Ji nu,*" I say. "*Shee veh.*"

Later I find out that his mother asked if there were any other Orientals in our grade. She had him put in my class on purpose. For now, though, he looks at me as though I'm much stranger than anything else he's seen so far. Is this because he understands I'm saying "soy sauce rice gruel" to him or because he doesn't?

65

"Sher-man," he says finally.

I look at his schedule card. Sherman Matsumoto. What kind of name is that for a nice Chinese boy?

{{???

(Later on, people ask me how I can tell Chinese from Japanese. I shrug. You just kind of know, I say. *Oy!*)

{{???

Sherman's got the sort of looks I think of as pretty-boy. Monsignor-black hair (not monk brown like mine), bouncy. Crayola eyebrows, one with a round bald spot in the middle of

it, like a golf hole. I don't know how anybody can think of him as orangish; his skin looks white to me, with pink triangles hanging down the front of his cheeks like flags. Kind of delicate-looking, but the only truly uncool thing about him is that his spiral notebook has a picture of a kitty cat on it. A big white fluffy one, with a blue ribbon above each perky little ear. I get much opportunity to view this, as all the poor kid understands about life in junior high school is that he should follow me everywhere. It's embarrassing. On the other hand, he's obviously even more miserable than I am, so I try not to say anything. Give him a chance to adjust. We communicate by sign language, and by drawing pictures, which he's better at than I am; he puts in every last detail, even if it takes forever. I try to be patient.

A week of this. Finally I enlighten him. "You should get a new notebook."

70

His cheeks turn a shade of pink you mostly only see in hyacinths.

"Notebook." I point to his. I show him mine, which is psychedelic, with big purple and yellow stick-on flowers. I try to explain he should have one like this, only without the flowers. He nods enigmatically, and the next day brings me a notebook just like his, except that this cat sports pink bows instead of blue. "Pret-ty," he says. "You."

He speaks English! I'm dumbfounded. Has he spoken it all this time? I consider: Pretty. You. What does that mean? Plus actually, he's said *plit-ty*, much as my parents would; I'm assuming he means pretty, but maybe he means pity. Pity. You.

"Jeez," I say finally.

75

"You are wel-come," he says.

I decorate the back of the notebook with stick-on flowers, and hold it so that these show when I walk through the halls. In class I mostly keep my book open. After all, the kid's so new; I think I really ought to have a heart. And for a livelong day nobody notices.

Then Barbara Gugelstein sidles up. "Matching notebooks, huh?"

I'm speechless.

"First comes love, then comes marriage, and then come chappies in a baby carriage."

80

"Barbara!"

"Get it?" she says. "Chinese Japs."

"Bar-bra," I say to get even.

"Just make sure he doesn't give you any *tea*," she says.

Are Sherman and I in love? Three days later, I hazard that we are. My thinking proceeds this way: I think he's cute, and I think he thinks I'm cute. On the other hand, we don't kiss and we don't exactly have fantastic conversations. Our talks *are* getting better, though. We started out, "This is a book." "Book." "This is a chair." "Chair." Advancing to, "What is this?" "This is a book." Now, for fun, he tests me.

85

"What is this?" he says.

"This is a book," I say, as if I'm the one who has to learn how to talk.

He claps. "Good!"

Meanwhile, people ask me all about him, I could be his press agent.

"No, he doesn't eat raw fish."

90

“No, his father wasn’t a kamikaze pilot.”

“No, he can’t do karate.”

“Are you sure?” somebody asks.

{{??}}

Indeed he doesn’t know karate, but judo he does. I am hurt I’m not the one to find this out; the guys know from gym class. They line up to be flipped, he flips them all onto the floor, and after that he doesn’t eat lunch at the girls’ table with me anymore. I’m more or less glad. Meaning, when he was there, I never knew what to say. Now that he’s gone, though, I seem to be stuck at the “This is a chair” level of conversation. Ancient Chinese eating habits have lost their cachet; all I get are more and more questions about me and Sherman. “I dunno,” I’m saying all the time. *Are* we going out? We do stuff, it’s true. For example, I take him to the department stores, explain to him who shops in Alexander’s, who shops in Saks. I tell him my family’s the type that shops in Alexander’s. He says he’s sorry. In Saks he gets lost; either that, or else I’m the lost one. (It’s true I find him calmly waiting at the front door, hands behind his back, like a guard.) I take him to the candy store. I take him to the bagel store. Sherman is crazy about bagels. I explain to him that Lender’s is gross, he should get his bagels from the bagel store. He says thank you. “Are you going steady?” people want to know.

95

How can we go steady when he doesn’t have an ID bracelet? On the other hand, he brings me more presents than I think any girl’s ever gotten before. Oranges. Flowers. A little bag of bagels. But what do they mean? Do they mean thank you, I enjoyed our trip; do they mean I like you; do they mean I decided I liked the Lender’s better even if they are gross, you can have these? Sometimes I think he’s acting on his mother’s instructions. Also I know at least a couple of the presents were supposed to go to our teachers. He told me that once and turned red. I figured it still might mean something that he didn’t throw them out.

More and more now, we joke. Like, instead of “I’m thinking,” he always says, “I’m sinking,” which we both think is so funny, that all either one of us has to do is pretend to be drowning and the other one cracks up. And he tells me things—for example, that there are electric lights everywhere in Tokyo now.

“You mean you didn’t have them before?”

“Everywhere now!” He’s amazed too. “Since Olympics!”

“Olympics?”

100

“1960,” he says proudly, and as proof, hums for me the Olympic theme song. “You know?”

“Sure,” I say, and hum with him happily. We could be a picture on a UNICEF poster.

The only problem is that I don’t really understand what the Olympics have to do with the modernization of Japan, any more than I get this other story he tells me, about that hole in his left eyebrow, which is from some time his father accidentally hit him with a lit cigarette. When Sherman was a baby. His father was drunk, having been out carousing; his mother was very mad but didn’t say anything, just cleaned the whole house. Then his father was so ashamed he bowed to ask her forgiveness.

“Your mother cleaned the house?”

Sherman nods solemnly.

“And your father *bowed*?” I find this more astounding than anything I ever thought to make up. “That is so weird,” I tell him.

105

“Weird,” he agrees. “This I no forget, forever. *Father bow to mother!*”

We shake our heads.

As for the things he asks me, they’re not topics I ever discussed before. Do I like it here? Of course I like it here, I was born here, I say. Am I Jewish? Jewish! I laugh. *Oy!* Am I American? “Sure I’m American,” I say. “Everybody who’s born here is American, and also some people who convert from what they were before. You could become American.” But he says no, he could never. “Sure you could,” I say. “You only have to learn some rules and speeches.”

“But I Japanese,” he says.

“You could become American anyway,” I say. “Like I *could* become Jewish, if I wanted to. I’d just have to switch, that’s all.”

110

“But you Catholic,” he says.

I think maybe he doesn’t get what means switch.

I introduce him to Mrs. Wilder’s turkey pot pies. “Gross?” he asks. I say they are, but we like them anyway. “Don’t tell anybody.” He promises. We bake them, eat them. While we’re eating, he’s drawing me pictures.

“This American,” he says, and he draws something that looks like John Wayne. “This Jewish,” he says, and draws something that looks like the Wicked Witch of the West, only male.

“I don’t think so,” I say.

115

He’s undeterred. “This Japanese,” he says, and draws a fair rendition of himself. “This Chinese,” he says, and draws what looks to be another fair rendition of himself.

“How can you tell them apart?”

“This way,” he says, and he puts the picture of the Chinese so that it is looking at the pictures of the American and the Jew. The Japanese faces the wall. Then he draws another picture, of a Japanese flag, so that the Japanese has that to contemplate. “Chinese lost in department store,” he says. “Japanese know how go.” For fun, he then takes the Japanese flag and fastens it to the refrigerator door with magnets. “In school, in ceremony, we this way,” he explains, and bows to the picture.

When my mother comes in, her face is so red that with the white wall behind her she looks a bit like the Japanese flag herself. Yet I get the feeling I better not say so. First she doesn’t move. Then she snatches the flag off the refrigerator, so fast the magnets go flying. Two of them land on the stove. She crumples up the paper. She hisses at Sherman, “*This is the U.S. of A., do you hear me!*”

Sherman hears her.

120

“You call your mother right now, tell her come pick you up.”

He understands perfectly. *I*, on the other hand, am stymied. How can two people who don’t really speak English understand each other better than I can understand them? “But Ma,” I say.

“Don’t *Ma* me,” she says.

Later on she explains that World War II was in China, too. “Hitler,” I say. “Nazis. Volkswagens.” I know the Japanese were on the wrong side, because they bombed Pearl Harbor. My mother explains about before that. The Napkin Massacre. “*Nan-king*,” she corrects me.

“Are you sure?” I say. “In school, they said the war was about putting the Jews in ovens.”

125

“Also about ovens.”

“About both?”

“Both.”

“That’s not what they said in school.”

“*Just forget about school.*”

130

Forget about school? “I thought we moved here for the schools.”

“We moved here,” she says, “for your education.”

Sometimes I have no idea what she’s talking about.

“I like Sherman,” I say after a while.

“He’s nice boy,” she agrees.

135

Meaning what? I would ask, except that my dad’s just come home, which means it’s time to start talking about whether we should build a brick wall across the front of the lawn.

Recently a car made it almost into our livingroom, which was so scary, the driver fainted and an ambulance had to come. “We should have discussion,” my dad said after that. And so for about a week, every night we do.

{{??}}

“Are you just friends, or more than just friends?” Barbara Gugelstein is giving me the cross-ex.

“Maybe,” I say.

“Come on,” she says, “I told you *everything* about me and Andy.”

I actually *am* trying to tell Barbara everything about Sherman, but everything turns out to be nothing. Meaning, I can’t locate the conversation in what I have to say. Sherman and I go places, we talk, one time my mother threw him out of the house because of World War II.

140

“I think we’re just friends,” I say.

“You think or you’re sure?”

Now that I do less of the talking at lunch, I notice more what other people talk about—cheerleading, who likes who, this place in White Plains to get earrings. On none of these topics am I an expert. Of course, I’m still friends with Barbara Gugelstein, but I notice Danielle Meyers has spun away to other groups.

Barbara’s analysis goes this way: To be popular, you have to have big boobs, a note from your mother that lets you use her Lord & Taylor credit card, and a boyfriend. On the other hand, what’s so wrong with being unpopular? “We’ll get them in the end,” she says. It’s what her dad tells her. “Like they’ll turn out too dumb to do their own investing, and then they’ll get killed in fees and then they’ll have to move to towns where the schools stink. And my dad should know,” she winds up. “He’s a broker.”

“I guess,” I say.

145

But the next thing I know, I have a true crush on Sherman Matsumoto. *Mister Judo*, the guys call him now, with real respect; and the more they call him that, the more I don't care that he carries a notebook with a cat on it.

I sigh. "Sherman."

"I thought you were just friends," says Barbara Gugelstein

"We were," I say mysteriously. This, I've noticed, is how Danielle Meyers talks; everything's secret, she only lets out so much, it's like she didn't grow up with everybody telling her she had to share.

And here's the funny thing: The more I intimate that Sherman and I are more than just friends, the more it seems we actually are. It's the old imagination giving reality a nudge. When I start to blush, he starts to blush; we reach a point where we can hardly talk at all.

150
"Well, there's first base with tongue, and first base without," I tell Barbara Gugelstein. In fact, Sherman and I have brushed shoulders, which was equivalent to first base I was sure, maybe even second. I felt as though I'd turned into one huge shoulder; that's all I was, one huge shoulder. We not only didn't talk, we didn't breathe. But how can I tell Barbara Gugelstein that? So instead I say, "Well there's second base and second base." Danielle Meyers is my friend again. She says, "I know exactly what you mean," just to make Barbara Gugelstein feel bad.

"Like *what* do I mean?" I say.

Danielle Meyers can't answer.

155

"You know what I think?" I tell Barbara the next day. "I think Danielle's giving us a line."

Barbara pulls thoughtfully on one of her pigtails.

{{??}}

If Sherman Matsumoto is never going to give me an ID to wear, he should at least get up the nerve to hold my hand. I don't think he sees this. I think of the story he told me about his parents, and in a synaptic firestorm realize we don't see the same things at all.

So one day, when we happen to brush shoulders again, I don't move away. He doesn't move away either. There we are. Like a pair of bleachers, pushed together but not quite matched up. After a while, I have to breathe, I can't help it. I breathe in such a way that our elbows start to touch too. We are in a crowd, waiting for a bus. I crane my neck to look at the sign that says where the bus is going; now our wrists are touching. Then it happens: He links his pinky around mine.

Is that holding hands? Later, in bed, I wonder all night. One finger, and not even the biggest one.

{{??}}

160

Sherman is leaving in a month. Already! I think, well, I suppose he will leave and we'll never even kiss. I guess that's all right. Just when I've resigned myself to it, though, we hold hands all five fingers. Once when we are at the bagel shop, then again in my parents' kitchen. Then, when we are at the playground, he kisses the back of my hand. He does it again not too long after that, in White Plains.

I invest in a bottle of mouthwash.

Instead of moving on, though, he kisses the back of my hand again. And again. I try raising my hand, hoping he'll make the jump from my hand to my cheek. It's like trying to wheedle an inchworm out the window. You know, *This way, this way.*

All over the world people have their own cultures. That's what we learned in social studies.

165

If we never kiss, I'm not going to take it personally.

{{??}}

It is the end of the school year. We've had parties. We've turned in our textbooks.

Hooray! Outside the asphalt already steams if you spit on it. Sherman isn't leaving for another couple of days, though, and he comes to visit every morning, staying until the afternoon, when Callie comes home from her big-deal job as a bank teller. We drink Kool-Aid in the backyard and hold hands until they are sweaty and make smacking noises coming apart. He tells me how busy his parents are, getting ready for the move. His mother, particularly, is very tired. Mostly we are mournful.

The very last day we hold hands and do not let go. Our palms fill up with water like a blister. We do not care. We talk more than usual. How much is airmail to Japan, that kind of thing. Then suddenly he asks, will I marry him? *I'm only thirteen.*

But when old? Sixteen?

170

If you come back to get me.

I come. Or you can come to Japan, be Japanese.

How can I be Japanese?

Like you become American. *Switch.*

He kisses me on the cheek, again and again and again.

175

His mother calls to say she's coming to get him. I cry. I tell him how I've saved every present he's ever given me—the ruler, the pencils, the bags from the bagels, all the flower petals. I even have the orange peels from the oranges.

All?

I put them in a jar.

I'd show him, except that we're not allowed to go upstairs to my room. Anyway, something about the orange peels seems to choke him up too. *Mister Judo*, but I've gotten him in a soft spot. We are going together to the bathroom to get some toilet paper to wipe our eyes when poor tired Mrs. Matsumoto, driving a shiny new station wagon, skids up onto our lawn.

"Very sorry!"

180

We race outside.

"Very sorry!"

Mrs. Matsumoto is so short that about all we can see of her is a green cotton sun hat, with a big brim. It's tied on. The brim is trembling.

I hope my mom's not going to start yelling about World War II.

"Is all right, no trouble," she says, materializing on the step behind me and Sherman.

She's propped the screen door wide open; when I turn I see she's waving. "No trouble, no trouble!"

185

“No trouble, no trouble!” I echo, twirling a few times with relief.

Mrs. Matsumoto keeps apologizing; my mom keeps insisting she shouldn't feel bad, it was only some grass and a small tree. Crossing the lawn, she insists Mrs. Matsumoto get out of the car, even though it means trampling some lilies of the valley. She insists that Mrs. Matsumoto come in for a cup of tea. Then she will not talk about anything unless Mrs. Matsumoto sits down, and unless she lets my mom prepare her a small snack. The coming in and the tea and the sitting down are settled pretty quickly, but they negotiate ferociously over the small snack, which Mrs. Matsumoto will not eat unless she can call Mr. Matsumoto. She makes the mistake of linking Mr. Matsumoto with a reparation of some sort, which my mom will not hear of.

“Please!”

“No no no no.”

Back and forth it goes. “No no no no.” “No no no no.” “No no no no.” What kind of conversation is that? I look at Sherman, who shrugs. Finally Mr. Matsumoto calls on his own, wondering where his wife is. He comes over in a taxi. He's a heavy-browed businessman, friendly but brisk—not at all a type you could imagine bowing to a lady with a taste for tie-on sun hats. My mom invites him in as if it's an idea she just this moment thought of. And would he maybe have some tea and a small snack?

190

Sherman and I sneak back outside for another farewell, by the side of the house, behind the forsythia bushes. We hold hands. He kisses me on the cheek again, and then—just when I think he's finally going to kiss me on the lips—he kisses me on the neck.

Is this first base?

He does it more. Up and down, up and down. First it tickles, and then it doesn't. He has his eyes closed. I close my eyes too. He's hugging me. Up and down. Then down.

He's at my collarbone.

Still at my collarbone. Now his hand's on my ribs. So much for first base. More ribs. The idea of second base would probably make me nervous if he weren't on his way back to Japan and if I really thought we were going to get there. As it is, though, I'm not in much danger of wrecking my life on the shoals of passion; his unmoving hand feels more like a growth than a boyfriend. He has his whole face pressed to my neck skin so I can't tell his mouth from his nose. I think he may be licking me.

195

From indoors, a burst of adult laughter. My eyelids flutter. I start to try and wiggle such that his hand will maybe budge upward.

Do I mean for my top blouse button to come accidentally undone?

He clenches his jaw, and when he opens his eyes, they're fixed on that button like it's a gnat that's been bothering him for far too long. He mutters in Japanese. If later in life he were to describe this as a pivotal moment in his youth, I would not be surprised. Holding the material as far from my body as possible, he buttons the button. Somehow we've landed up too close to the bushes. {{???

What to tell Barbara Gugelstein? She says, “Tell me what were his last words. He must have said something last.”

“I don't want to talk about it.”

200

“Maybe he said, Good-bye?” she suggests. “Sayonara?” She means well. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Aw, come on, I told you everything about . . .”

I say, “Because it’s private, excuse me.”

She stops, squints at me as though at a far-off face she’s trying to make out. Then she nods and very lightly places her hand on my forearm.

{{??}}

205

The forsythia seemed to be stabbing us in the eyes. Sherman said, more or less, *You will need to study how to switch.*

And I said, *I think you should switch. The way you do everything is weird.*

And he said, *You just want to tell everything to your friends. You just want to have boyfriend to become popular.*

Then he flipped me. Two swift moves, and I went sprawling through the air, a flailing confusion of soft human parts such as had no idea where the ground was.

{{??}}

It is the fall, and I am in high school, and still he hasn’t written, so finally I write him.

210

I still have all your gifts, I write. I don’t talk so much as I used to. Although I am not exactly a mouse either. I don’t care about being popular anymore. I swear. Are you happy to be back in Japan? I know I ruined everything. I was just trying to be entertaining. I miss you with all my heart, and hope I didn’t ruin everything.

He writes back, *You will never be Japanese.*

I throw all the orange peels out that day. Some of them, it turns out, were moldy anyway.

I tell my mother I want to move to Chinatown.

“Chinatown!” she says.

I don’t know why I suggested it.

215

“What’s the matter?” she says. “Still boy-crazy? That Sherman?”

“No.”

“Too much homework?”

I don’t answer.

“Forget about school.”

220

Later she tells me if I don’t like school, I don’t have to go everyday. Some days I can stay home.

“Stay home?” In Yonkers, Callie and I used to stay home all the time, but that was because the schools there were *waste of time.*

“No good for a girl be too smart anyway.”

{{??}}

For a long time I think about Sherman. But after a while I don’t think about him so much as I just keep seeing myself flipped onto the ground, lying there shocked as the Matsumotos get ready to leave. My head has hit a rock; my brain aches as though it’s been shoved to some new place in my skull. Otherwise I am okay. I see the forsythia, all those whippy branches, and can’t believe how many leaves there are on a bush—every one green and perky and durably itself. And past them, real sky. I try to remember about

why the sky's blue, even though this one's gone the kind of indescribable grey you associate with the insides of old shoes. I smell grass. Probably I have grass stains all over my back. I hear my mother calling through the back door, "Mon-a! Everyone leaving now," and "Not coming to say good-bye?" I hear Mr. and Mrs. Matsumoto bowing as they leave—or at least I hear the embarrassment in my mother's voice as they bow. I hear their car start. I hear Mrs. Matsumoto directing Mr. Matsumoto how to back off the lawn so as not to rip any more of it up. I feel the back of my head for blood—just a little. I hear their chug-chug grow fainter and fainter, until it has faded into the whuzz-whuzz of all the other cars. I hear my mom singing, "*Mon-a! Mon-a!*" until my dad comes home. Doors open and shut. I see myself standing up, brushing myself off so I'll have less explaining to do if she comes out to look for me. Grass stains—just like I thought. I see myself walking around the house, going over to have a look at our churned-up yard. It looks pretty sad, two big brown tracks, right through the irises and the lilies of the valley, and that was a new dogwood we'd just planted. Lying there like that. I hear myself thinking about my father, having to go dig it up all over again. Adjusting. I think how we probably ought to put up that brick wall. And sure enough, when I go inside, no one's thinking about me, or that little bit of blood at the back of my head, or the grass stains. That's what they're talking about—that wall. Again. My mom doesn't think it'll do any good, but my dad thinks we should give it a try. Should we or shouldn't we? How high? How thick? What will the neighbors say? I plop myself down on a hard chair. And all I can think is, we are the complete only family that has to worry about this. If I could, I'd switch everything to be different. But since I can't, I might as well sit here at the table for a while, discussing what I know how to discuss. I nod and listen to the rest.

Suggestions for Writing and Discussion

1.

Read this piece all the way through for enjoyment. As soon as you are finished, write a five-minute response to the values you see represented by one of the characters in this piece.

2.

Does Mona belong predominantly to one culture? Explain your answer with three pieces of evidence from the text.

3.

Compare and contrast Mona and her mother, Mona and her friends, and Mona and Sherman. From these comparisons, what conclusions can you draw about Mona's ideals, hopes, fears, and values? What are the major conflicts in this story?

4.

In one conversation with Sherman, Mona tells him to simply "switch" cultures. She thinks it's possible; Sherman believes it isn't. Whom do you agree with on this issue and why?

5.

What's Mona's first reaction when she notices Sherman? What's the main reason she begins to change her impression of him? What does this reveal about Mona?

6.

What, besides the cultural differences, can explain the tensions in communication between Mona and Sherman?

7.

What incidents in the story help explain how culture affects relationships within the Japanese family? Within the Chinese family? How do these relationships differ from those in the typical American family?

8.

Analyze the images in the final paragraph in terms of their symbolic value in this piece. Why might the author choose to use these images at this point in the story?

Suggestions for Extended Thinking and Writing

1.

Research the roles of family members in Japan or China today. Compare these roles with those in your own family, and write an essay in which you draw a significant conclusion on the basis of your findings.

2.

Interview a student from another country who is here to study in America. Set up open-ended questions so that you not only get to know more about this person's country but also get to know the values, concerns, and attitudes of the individual toward America. After this interview, write an essay that balances what you learned about the individual's insights and his or her country.

KITTY TSUI

Don't Let Them Chip Away at Our Language

Kitty Tsui was born in Kowloon, Hong Kong, in 1952. She grew up in England and Hong Kong and moved with her family to the United States in 1969. In addition to being an actress and competitive bodybuilder, Tsui is an acclaimed artist and is the author of a collection of poetry, The Words of a Woman Who Breathes Fire (1983).

Suggestions for Prereading or Journal Writing

1.

Complete the following statement, and freewrite for five or ten minutes: "The one thing about my community, state, or country that really makes me angry is. . . ."

2.

Why do you (or why don't you) get involved in an active way in community, state, or national issues that make you angry?

haa-low, okay,
dank que, gut bye.
the only words
my grandmother knew.

5

the only words of english
she spoke
on a regular basis
in her rhythm of
city cantonese

10

mixed with

chinatown slang:

du pont guy,
low-see beef,
and, you good gel,

15

sic gee mah go,
sic apple pie
yum coca co-la.
a few proper nouns
were also part of

20

her vocabulary.
ny name, kit-ee
san fan-see,
pete gid-ding
her favorite

25

weatherman on tv,
say-fu-way
where she would
stock up on
rolls of toilet paper,

30

sponges and ajax.
on sale, of course.
in the spring of 1985
a republican assemblyman
proposed a bill

35

to make english
the official language
of the state.

his rationale:
we're no longer

40

going to let them
chip away at our language.
if they can't

understand english
they shouldn't be here

45

at all.

we first came
in 1785, three seamen
stranded in baltimore.
later we were

50

merchants and traders,
cooks and tailors,
contract laborers hired
to work in the mines,
in construction,

55

in the canneries,
hired to do what no man would:
hang from cliffs in a basket,
endure harsh winters
and blast through rock

60

to build the iron horse.
we became sharecroppers
growing peanuts,
strawberries,
cabbage and

65

chrysanthemums.
opened restaurants
and laundries,
worked in rich homes,
on ranches and farms

70

tending stock,
cleaning house,
cooking and ironing,
chopping firewood,
composing letters home

75

dreaming of a wife, a son.
we are tong yan,
american born
and immigrants
living in l.a., arizona,

80

brooklyn and the bronx,
san mateo and the sunset.
we eat burgers and baw,
custard tart and bubblegum.
we are doctors, actors,

85

artists, carpenters,
maids and teachers,
gay and straight.

we speak in many tongues:
sam yup, say yup, street talk,
90

the queen's english.
please don't let them
chip away at our language.

Suggestions for Writing and Discussion

1.

In what way does the title of this piece reflect the conflict and the thesis of this poem?

2.

Tsui chooses to use only lowercase letters in this poem. Why do you think she does that? Would the poem have been changed for you if she had used capital letters in the conventional places? Explain.

3.

Analyze the English words of which the speaker's grandmother had command (lines 1–31). What parts of American culture does she have access to? From what parts is she excluded? Why does Tsui bother to include the specific products that the grandmother uses? What do these details add to the poem?

4.

Compare the responsibilities of the first Chinese settlers (lines 46–60) with those in later years (lines 61–75). What conclusions can you draw about this group of people?

5.

What exactly does the speaker mean in the last two lines of this poem? Compare the tone of these lines with that in lines 39–41.

Suggestions for Extended Thinking and Writing

1.

Research the contributions of your ancestors to America. Write an essay, or perhaps a poem, in which you trace these contributions during three separate time periods in America's history, including the present, as Tsui does.

2.

Write a letter of thanks in which you acknowledge the specific ways in which past family members have contributed to making you who you are today.

TOPICS FOR MAKING CONNECTIONS:

QUESTIONS OF LANGUAGE

1. Write an essay in which you argue that language should belong to the people who speak it. Use the experiences and insights you find in at least three sources in this chapter for your support. You may, of course, use other outside sources as well.

2. Write an essay in which you argue for or against the following proposition: "The rules of standard American English ought to be followed by all writers and speakers in our society." Again, use as many sources as you can from this chapter, as well as pertinent outside sources you find on your own.

3. In what ways can the language of one dominating culture affect the mental, physical, and psychological health of subordinate cultures? In order to answer this question, use

three to five sources from this chapter. Feel free to use your own experiences with language as well.

4. Write a conversation that might take place between two of the authors in this chapter. The viewpoints do not necessarily have to be contrasting in order for this conversation to be effective. For example, you could pair up Gonzalez and Rodriguez. You could also pair up Farb and Gonzalez or Jones and Rodriguez.

5. Write an essay on sexism or racism in the language of advertising. Use examples from current ads and commercials, and point out the dangers of this language as several authors in this chapter would see it.

6. Compare the language in three different types of popular music today: perhaps a white country-western female singer, an urban black rapper, and a white rock idol. How do the lyrics, messages, and syntax relate to what the authors in this chapter have told us?

7. Evaluate one piece in this chapter from a rhetorical standpoint. What appeals does the writer use? What type of language does the writer use? What evidence is used? Does the writer address the opposing argument? Is the organization effective? Is the writer fair-minded or biased to a certain degree? As a critic, what is your overall judgment of this piece from a rhetorical standpoint? Is the argument convincing? Explain.

8. Write an extended metaphor for how sexist or racist language affects those subjected to it. You may choose the format of an essay or a poem for this topic.

9. Considering your own observations and what you have discovered from the selections in this chapter, write a speech in which you convince local high school or college students that our language creates and maintains sexist myths. Propose several suggestions that may help alleviate this condition.

10. Examine several copies of local high school and college history texts. Are women and ethnic minorities denigrated in any way in these textbooks? Do the texts focus on the historical contributions and superiority of “white, Anglo-Saxon men”? Report on your findings.

11. Write an essay in which you examine, using the sources in this chapter, the power of a single word. In a cultural context, how powerful is language at the word level?

12. Write an essay in which you explore the various social pressures on children to conform to gender roles. By referring to sources in this chapter, discuss some of these outside forces and evaluate how they work. Feel free to include your own experiences as well.

13. Choose a racial, national, sexist, or religious insult and analyze the possible implications of this slur. See if you can discover where the term originated and how the term has changed in meaning today.

14. Can people from one culture ever really understand a person from a different culture? Rely on your own experience as well as the information in this chapter in order to answer this question.

15. Does what we say really reflect what we think? Write an essay in which you explore this question in terms of your own life and the lives of the authors you have met in this chapter.

16. Using the selections in this chapter, write an essay in which you synthesize what you have learned about language and prejudice.

¹Within the lexicon itself, there seems to be a parallel phenomenon to tag-question usage, which I refrain from discussing in the body of the text because the facts are controversial

and I do not understand them fully. The intensive *so*, used where purists would insist upon an absolute superlative, heavily stressed, seems more characteristic of women's language than of men's, though it is found in the latter, particularly in the speech of male academics. Consider, for instance, the following sentences:

(a) I feel *so* unhappy!

(b) That movie made me *so* sick!

Men seem to have the least difficulty using this construction when the sentence is unemotional, or nonsubjective—without reference to the speaker himself:

(c) That sunset is *so* beautiful!

(d) Fred is *so* dumb!

Substituting an equative like *so* for absolute superlatives (like *very*, *really*, *utterly*) seems to be a way of backing out of committing oneself strongly to an opinion, rather like tag questions (cf. discussion below, in the text). One might hedge in this way with perfect right in making aesthetic judgments, as in (c), or intellectual judgments, as in (d). But it is somewhat odd to hedge in describing one's own mental or emotional state: who, after all, is qualified to contradict one on this? To hedge in this situation is to seek to avoid making any strong statement: a characteristic, as we have noted already and shall note further, of women's speech.

²For analogues outside of English to these uses of tag questions and special intonation patterns, cf. my discussion of Japanese particles in "Language in Context," *Language*, 48 (1972), pp. 907–927. It is to be expected that similar cases will be found in many other languages as well. See, for example, M. R. Haas's very interesting discussion of differences between men's and women's speech mostly involving lexical dissimilarities in many languages, in D. Hymes, ed., *Language in Culture and Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

³For more detailed discussion of these problems, see Lakoff, "Language in Context."

JANET REITMAN

Warning: Viewer Discretion Advised

Journalist Janet Reitman writes regularly for Scholastic Update, where this selection originally appeared on February 22, 1999. Her articles have appeared in other publications, such as Jane magazine, Harper's Bazaar, and Salon. She was also a writer for the Getting Gazette, a paper published by women writers, reporters, editors, and political activists for the women delegates to the Democratic convention in 1992.

Suggestions for Prereading or Journal Writing

1.

What single factor has the greatest impact on how kids view the world today? Explain.

2.

If you were in charge, what restrictions, if any, would you put on television viewing? Explain.

Fade in: A video store in a quaint New England seaside town. Enter a beautiful blonde woman, wearing a nearly see-through sundress. "I'm in the mood for love," she tells the

cute-but-slightly-nerdy video clerk. They discuss several movies where the main character is an older woman who seduces a younger man.

The clerk is intrigued.

The scene changes and the beautiful blonde and the video clerk are captured in a passionate embrace under a tree.

Fade out.

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So begins one episode of Dawson's Creek, the hugely popular weekly TV drama about a group of teenagers in the fictional small town of Capeside, Massachusetts. The clerk, whose name is Pacey, is 15. His lover is about 40. She's also his English teacher.

This episode, along with others in which Pacey and his friends Dawson, Joey, and Jen deal with sex and their parents' extramarital affairs, helped make Dawson's Creek the most-watched TV show among teenagers last year.

It also created an uproar among conservative social critics and many parents and teachers, who complain that a television show depicting a high school student having sex with his teacher is irresponsible and sends an immoral message to teens. "The people putting out this show should be profoundly ashamed for exploitively gratifying the fantasies of young adolescents," says Jerry Weiner, former president of the American Psychiatric Association. "It's an incredibly shallow and superficial way to attract an audience."

The Parents Television Council, a media watchdog group, ranks Dawson's Creek No. 1 in its annual "Dirty Dozen" list of TV shows that it believes are vulgar, sexually explicit, and threatening to traditional family values. Other groups, meanwhile, have pressured the WB Network to add tougher content warning labels, air the program later at night, or drop it entirely.

The furor over Dawson's Creek is only the latest example of a growing national debate over the role of popular culture in shaping young people's values and behavior. On one side are those who argue that today's mass media—TV shows, movies, advertisements, and rock and rap music—teach kids to be "selfish, dishonest, sexually promiscuous, and violent," as one critic puts it. On the other side are those who argue that the changing values of teenagers have more to do with such issues as access to quality education and the role of parents.

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Many teens take a dim view of the messages they receive from the media. "I'd say the media's impact on kids' values is pretty negative," says Sam Vitelli, 17, of Easton, Pennsylvania. "If you spend a good part of the day watching TV, it can warp your reality and you can start to lose the values your parents raised you with. You see a lot of action movies, guns, violence, or sex, and [you] start to think, 'That's fun.'"

Warped Entertainment

Probably no recent pop-culture figure has come under more attack than rock star Marilyn Manson. With his ghoulish white skin, goth makeup, and sexual stage performances, Manson has built a successful career out of controversy. His first album, *Antichrist Superstar*, was filled with references to occultism, torture, suicide, and murder. And in his latest album, *Mechanical Animals*, he warns: "Raise your kids better, or I'll raise them for you."

Some communities, taking his warning to heart, have tried to ban Manson's albums and live performances. That some of the teens involved in last year's wave of school shootings were devoted Manson fans only heightened his notoriety.

Ted Mankin, a Manson concert promoter, defends the act as mere entertainment. "It's rock theater," he says. "Manson won't bring Armageddon. Everyone is safe."

But many experts say warped entertainment can indeed be harmful. According to a recent national study, many TV shows glamorize violence by, for example, having otherwise good characters commit violent acts. "These patterns teach children that violence is desirable, necessary, and painless," says Dale Kunkel, a researcher for the study.

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And some researchers argue that repeated viewing of violent acts can numb the viewer to acts of real violence. "Television violence by itself does not kill you," says psychologist David Grossman. "It destroys your violence immune system, and conditions you to derive pleasure from violence."

The Media Made Me Do It

Organizations more concerned about sexual permissiveness than about violence make a similar argument. When movies, music, and TV make it seem that everybody's doing it, they contend, kids may decide that it's OK for them to do it too. And media that glamorize sex rarely seem to discuss its possible consequences.

Media executives, however, downplay their role in forming society's values. "You can't put everything on the backs of broadcasters," protests John Eamhardt, spokesman for the National Association of Broadcasters. "Parents definitely have a role."

Marilyn Benoit, a child and adolescent psychiatrist based in Washington, D.C., says parents should try to counter the media's message with their own: "It's not that sex and violence should be taboo subjects [in the media], but they should launch good, healthy discussions. I wonder how many parents sat down and talked to their kids after the Mike Tyson fight in which he bit the ear of his opponent. I wonder how many parents told their children that was outrageous behavior."

Ultimately, say many kids, the responsibility for interpreting the media will be theirs—along with the choice of what to watch or listen to. "I think that media do influence our thoughts to some degree," says Matt Ater, 19, of Bath, Maine. "But a lot of people know that what they see is all about someone trying to sell records, get ratings, get attention. In the end, values are about choice—and it's up to every individual to choose what to do."

Suggestions for Writing and Discussion

1.

In what ways does your prereading response agree or disagree with the message in this piece?

2.

Choose two statements you strongly agree with and two you disagree with. Write your reasons for your reactions.

3.

To what extent has this piece changed or altered your way of thinking about this issue? Explain.

4.

Find two places in this article where specific examples and facts would add to the argument.

5.

Overall, how would you rate this piece as an argument?

Suggestions for Extended Thinking and Writing

1.

Watch an episode of a popular American sitcom on television today. Make special note of the sexual scenes and innuendos as well as the type of language and incidents of violence you see. Based on your observations, to what audience would this show appeal most? For what audience might this show not be suitable? Explain.

2.

Argue for or against the banning of a particular show on television today.

3.

Analyze the media factors that might have influenced your life when you were a teenager, focusing primarily on your favorite television shows at the time.

GLORIA GOODALE

Star Wars Forever

Gloria Goodale is the arts and culture correspondent for the Christian Science Monitor, where this selection originally appeared on May 19, 1999.

Suggestions for Prereading or Journal Writing

1.

If you could keep only one book or one movie in your possession forever, which one would you choose and why?

2.

What's your reaction to *Star Wars* mania?

George Lucas spins movie gold out of the oldest of storytelling straw: noble heroes, pretty but spunky heroines, and a simple world of clear rights and wrongs. (It doesn't hurt that the toys are really cool too! What young boy could resist the Force if it came with that nifty light saber?)

But somehow the original "Star Wars" movie (1977), a classic coming-of-age story, went beyond good storytelling. It hit a cultural chord so deep that it has resonated well into the next generation. Why?

"Star Wars' is the spear point," says longtime Hollywood story consultant Christopher Vogler. "There's a huge missile behind it, namely the whole world it creates that you can go and live in."

Mr. Vogler wrote Hollywood's screenwriting bible, "The Writer's Journey," using the fundamentals of a hero's journey detailed by Joseph Campbell, the mythologist who inspired George Lucas. He was also in film school with Mr. Lucas. "Star Wars" mania, Vogler says, comes from a great talent (Lucas) mixed with that ultimate Hollywood goal—perfect timing.

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“The initial ‘Star Wars’ was the first refutation of cynicism and irony,” he says. The 1970s were dominated by “antihero” films like “Easy Rider” and “Bonnie and Clyde.” “This was the first one that said, ‘Let’s go back to childhood. Instead of being angry teenagers, let’s . . . go back to that primary experience of just having a good summer.’” Today, grown-ups who saw the film as children use it to share that experience with their children.

But “Star Wars” has had staying power because it is deeply rooted in the primal human concerns of birth, death, and redemption. Through the maturing of young Luke Skywalker, his father, Darth Vader, is redeemed. “The movie is really the apotheosis of this whole complex of ideas and semireligious feelings people have,” Vogler says. “The best filmmakers use film in the service of spiritual ideas,” adds Robert Walter, director of the Joseph Campbell Foundation. Campbell was the eminent mythologist whose book “The Hero’s Journey” catalogued the stories and teachings of world cultures and showed a universal pattern in them. Lucas has credited Campbell as his inspiration for the “Star Wars.”

The filmmaker also has been accused of trivializing these great traditions with the famous line “May the Force be with you.” But “it’s not trivializing unless we believe the spiritual impulse is less valuable in the common person than in the breast of the official keeper of the flame,” Mr. Walter says. He calls movies “the frescoes of the 20th century.” These were once painted on walls or in stained glass and told a story. Today, “film is the conveyor of those popular stories,” he says.

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“Films allow us to dream collectively about who we are, where we are going, and what we value,” says Ted Tollefson, director of the Mythos Institute, a cultural think tank in Frontenac, Minn. The “Star Wars” films deal with a distant time and place, which in itself implies the possibility of an ongoing life for mankind. “When there’s a school shooting [like Littleton, Colo.], we worry about that.”

“Why does anyone willingly choose evil?” asks philosopher Arthur Danto. The professor emeritus at Columbia University says that in the wake of the Colorado shootings, people are looking for answers. “Star Wars: Episode 1—The Phantom Menace” introduces an angelic-faced boy who will grow up to be the menacing Darth Vader. “Most of the causal explanations [for the Littleton shootings], ‘he was picked on’ or ‘he needed power,’ aren’t enough,” says Mr. Danto. The “Star Wars” films “give people a powerful myth [with which] to think out questions” they need to have answered.

Lucas has said that his films are aimed at “a 12-year-old boy.” The “Star Wars” films revolve around the coming-of-age of young men, and in particular the impact of an absent or remote father. (It’s hard to get more distant than the evil Darth Vader was to Luke Skywalker.) One big surprise in “Episode 1” centers on Vader’s own father. As young Anakin Skywalker (before turning to the dark side as Vader) he lacks a human father. With this apparent “virgin birth,” perhaps to be explained in Episodes 2 and 3, Lucas tackles two timeless questions: Where do we come from and who are we?

“One of the missing pieces of our time is the father,” Mr. Tollefson says. In mythology, the absent father is a powerful motivator. “This seems to be one of the characteristics that launches a hero on his quest for some sort of spiritual father or connection to a deeper organizing principle of life,” he explains. In today’s society, Tollefson sees many young

men with no fathers as having no way to break through to a closer connection to a spiritual sensibility or a more mature connection to society.

In the absence of such a connection, Tollefson suggests, many young men turn to what he calls redemption through violence. Lucas offers an alternative redemption, he says.

“When Luke [Skywalker] lays down his light sword and says he will fight no more, he redeems himself and, ultimately, his father, Darth Vader.”

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A young man’s romance with technology is another “Star Wars” theme that has powerful resonance today, says James Maertens, author and director of the Bardic Institute in Minneapolis. “‘Star Wars’ teaches the lesson . . . that technology can turn you into a hero, but it can also seduce you into evil,” he says. The underlying message is that it’s not the machines that make you good or bad, but the choices you make.

Other thinkers are far less charitable about the films. “They address our hunger for mythology, but they don’t meet it,” says Lewis Hyde, a professor of art and politics at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio. The way these films simplistically frame the fight between good and evil contributes to our inability to live with moral complexity.

“Without moral shadings, we become cruel,” he says. When people don’t fit our pattern of good and bad, it’s easy to adopt an aggressive attitude toward them. Often this is what’s going on with children who are attracted to Nazi imagery, as were Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the teenage shooters in Littleton, Colo.

Suggestions for Writing and Discussion

1.

How would you characterize the general tone of this piece? Cite three or four examples from the text that support your opinion.

2.

What would you say is the author’s main purpose in writing this piece? To inform? To persuade? To entertain? Something else?

3.

What other movies today might tap into the same primal concerns that the author mentions here?

4.

The philosopher Arthur Danto asks this question: “Why would anyone willingly choose evil?” What’s your answer to this question? If you’re a *Star Wars* fan, in what ways does this series answer this question?

5.

Besides the absence of a father, what else might launch people today on a quest for meaning in their lives?

Suggestions for Extended Writing and Thinking

1.

Develop your response to the prereading question that asks you about your favorite book or movie. Analyze in greater depth the impact that this book or movie has had on you and argue for others to find this piece worthy as well.

2.

Watch any movie that has won an Oscar in the past twenty-five years in order to come to grips with the values and problems facing society during that particular year.

3.

This article deals primarily with how others view the *Star Wars* phenomenon. Find credible articles that will give you a firsthand look at how George Lucas himself views his film, and write your own article on the movie and the man behind it.

ELIZABETH KENDALL

Romance with Relish, Please

Critic and writer Elizabeth Kendall is the author of four books, including *Runaway Bride: Hollywood Romantic Comedy of the 1930s* (1990) and *American Daughter*. This selection originally appeared in the December 1998/January 1999 issue of *Civilization*.
Suggestions for Prereading or Journal Writing

1.

True love through e-mail: Do you think it's possible? Explain.

2.

How would you describe yourself: as a romantic in search of a perfect love, or a realist who harbors few illusions? Explain.

Nora Ephron's surprisingly fresh new romantic comedy, *You've Got Mail*, turns on a plot twist that seems to come right out of our computer-driven world. In fact, it was borrowed and adapted from a 1940 movie, *The Shop Around the Corner*, starring Margaret Sullavan and James Stewart, that's a cult favorite. In the new movie, as in the old, the hero and heroine are natural enemies. Meg Ryan runs a cozy children's bookstore on New York's Upper West Side; Tom Hanks is the scion of the Fox family, of Fox Books (read: Barnes & Noble), which is opening a mega-bookstore next door. They exchange bitter retorts in public. But unknown to them both, they are carrying on an intimate conversation—a near romance—as anonymous e-mail correspondents. They are “talking” to each other on their computer screens (we hear their voiceovers saying their messages even as they are typing them in) as carefully, as truly, as wittily as Stewart and Sullavan spoke to each other in the earlier movie's revelatory letters.

And yet, at the same time, Ryan and Hanks are living busy lives at full tilt. This is the first romantic comedy in a long time in which the protagonists don't just moon about romance. Ryan opens her shop in the morning and starts in with her bohemian employees on a bifurcated conversation about book orders and the impossibility of meeting people. “As far as I'm concerned, the Internet is just another way to be rejected by a woman,” says George, her woebegone salesman. Hanks strides through his new multilevel store nodding at his staff while carrying on a puzzled conversation about love with his young but wise assistant.

This is the movie's great strength: It mixes love and work together the way these two primal themes haven't been mixed since the great classic comedies of the 1930s. Nora Ephron, one of the current masterminds of the genre, seems to have merged our edgy postfeminist landscape, in which women insist on independence and men don't know quite how to treat them, with the atmosphere of wistfulness and economic danger that

reigns in Hollywood's classic examples of romantic comedy. In the process, she is pulling this uniquely American kind of movie out of the wimpy confusion in which it wallowed during most of the 1990s.

There are plenty of ridiculous and unbearably coy romantic comedies around, but the good ones have always managed to capture the full range of confusion in people's minds like no other genre quite can. Ever since the Great Depression, romantic comedy has shown an uncanny ability to second-guess its audience, to dramatize the credibility gap between reigning social myths and the real forces pushing people around. In the 1930s, the most pressing such crisis was the death of the American Cinderella fantasy. It looked as if nobody would ever get rich again. The lower classes hated the upper classes. And gender roles were messed up: so many men unemployed, so many women forced to work.

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Hollywood soon hit on the bright idea of making movies that examined the nation's anguish by means of cross-class romance. Brilliant films resulted, full of subtle, searching, witty talk between men and women—movies such as *My Man Godfrey* (1936), *The Awful Truth* (1937), and *The Lady Eve* (1940). *It Happened One Night* (1934), the greatest of them all, throws runaway heiress Claudette Colbert and plebeian reporter Clark Gable together on a Greyhound bus. They hate each other violently, which results in their falling in love, which ends in a nearslapstick disruption of the wrong (high-society) wedding in favor of the right one.

These movies functioned as civic and romantic morality plays rolled into one: When the man and woman finally got together, the body politic was mended and the gender gap was shrunk. But after the Depression, romantic comedies grew thin and wan. The social resonance of crisis was gone. The genre wasn't new anymore. Only formula remained—think of those arch and pretty dramas starring Doris Day and Audrey Hepburn. Romance in a comic mode almost vanished in the late 1960s and '70s in a flood of cheap yuks, Vietnam movies, adventure epics, and crime dramas. All that was left were Woody Allen's compulsive monologues—from *Play It Again, Sam* (1972) through *Annie Hall* (1978) and *Manhattan* (1979).

Comic romance made a kind of comeback in the late 1980s. A quartet of well-written, well-made, and well-acted romantic comedies emerged without warning: *Bull Durham* (1988), *Working Girl* (1988), *When Harry Met Sally . . .* (1989), and *Pretty Woman* (1990). Savvy female leads, played respectively by Susan Sarandon, Melanie Griffith, Meg Ryan, and Julia Roberts, managed to win not only the guy's love but also his respect (along with the audience's). These movies showed that glamour and urban wit and classic pop love songs had come back in style. And, too, women were at center-screen having their way, as they hadn't been—except as bomb-shells and femmes fatales—since the 1930s.

But something weird happened to romantic comedy in the 1990s: It lost its brazenness and dove into a kind of cosmic loneliness. The main culprit here was Nora Ephron's hit movie of 1993, *Sleepless in Seattle*. (*Sleepless* marked Ephron's directorial debut; she wrote the screenplay for *When Harry Met Sally . . .*.) It took the whole genre in a new direction: Instead of hating each other and talking it through, the characters spent most of the movie managing not to meet. Hanks, who lost his wife to cancer, brooded on his back porch in Seattle. Ryan, who heard his lonely story on the radio in Baltimore (when his

eight-year-old son called a talk show), kept trying to get up the courage to make contact with him. And she kept watching an old movie on TV (1952's *An Affair to Remember*), as if mourning the impossibility of such an ardor as Cary Grant's and Deborah Kerr's. ("You want to be in love in a movie," says her sidekick, played by Rosie O'Donnell.) *Sleepless* posed the question: Can there even be romance in our modern world, where men and women are so distracted by the need to be mature and practical that they can't find a way to begin to talk honestly?

Sleepless set the tone for the last few years: Even charming, literate movies spilled over into a neurotic despair about the characters' puny little hopes of romance. There have been more beaten-down kindred spirits who don't meet until the end of the film (the nurse and the plumber in *Next Stop, Wonderland*, 1998). There was a woman so scared to risk love that she gets a friend to impersonate her (*The Truth about Cats and Dogs*, 1997). And a man so emotionally dense that he has to translate romance into the language of golf (*Tin Cup*, 1996). There was even a highly neurotic best-selling author who can't talk about romance at all (*As Good as It Gets*, 1997). What got lost in this morbid romantic quest is that key feature of golden-age romantic comedy: vibrant, probing conversations in which the characters spar with each other as they step forward into intimacy.

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Now, finally, there are signs that the genre is leaving morbidity behind and embracing a clearer, livelier vision of the interaction between romance and real life. One of them is the unexpectedly generous end of what starts out as a cruel movie, 1997's *My Best Friend's Wedding*. Julia Roberts, a career woman who tries to break up the wedding of the "best friend" she always thought she'd marry, learns to accept the force of love in other people's lives and to savor the pleasures in her own, more solitary existence. We understand, from her mega-kilowatt smile as she dances at the wedding party with her other "best friend," her gay editor from New York, that she's calmed down and started to have fun.

And now comes *You've Got Mail*, with its funny, unanxious spirit and its smart portraits of sophisticated people in a gilded but not unrealistic New York. Mail points up what's been missing in the 1990s: a wider social context for love. Hanks and Ryan are not just dangling in romantic angst; they are firmly planted in city life, a life full of social and economic realities that have wider implications about American life. He's rich; she's the economic "little guy." The old bargain is struck in the course of the movie: She learns fearlessness from his *modus operandi*; he is humanized by her bohemian spirit. In the process, the troubled psychic landscape of our time is sketched—a landscape filled with successful women haunted by a nameless anxiety and men who have turned timid with the thought that women may not need them. This state of affairs is at least as out of whack with what romance requires as were the drastic psychic dislocations of the Great Depression. When Hanks and Ryan fall into each other's arms at the end of *You've Got Mail*, in the midst of spring-green Riverside Park, it's because they've understood something of all this, not because they are panicked and lonely.

Maybe the genre is growing up. That would be nice. Clear-eyed, light-handed movies about romance could be especially useful today, when our compulsive president and his joyless opponents have dragged the subject through the mud—when the very notion of American sexual maturity is a joke heard 'round the world.

Suggestions for Writing and Discussion

1.

To what specific audience might this piece be addressed, and what assumptions does the writer have about the members in this audience?

2.

What does the author believe are the basic differences between the romantic comedy *You've Got Mail* and others out at this same time?

3.

What does the author mean when she says that romance comedies “second-guess” the audience?

4.

The author claims that many modern romance movies take a look at “the nation’s anguish” through romantic plots. Assuming this statement is true, what might be the anguish that this nation faces today?

5.

React to any one of the four movies listed in paragraph 7. Do you agree with the author’s assessment of this film? Explain.

6.

Comment on the ending of this piece. How appropriate is it, considering the theme and the subject matter covered?

Suggestions for Extended Writing and Thinking

1.

Watch *You've Got Mail* and write your own review of it. In what ways do you agree with Kendall’s insights? In what ways do you disagree?

2.

Review any of the other movies listed in this article and write a review of this film. In what ways does this movie comply with the criteria Kendall has set forth for a successful romantic comedy?

3.

Romance: What is it, and how necessary is it to one’s life? Write an essay in which you define the term and analyze its importance in a relationship. While you may include your own experience here, relying on “experts” is certainly a good idea, too.

PATRICK McCORMICK

Out of the Closet and into Your Livingroom

Patrick McCormick, assistant professor of ethics at Gonzaga University, is co-author of *Character, Choices, and Community* (with Russell B. Connors, 1998), a textbook about Christian ethics. He is also the culture columnist for *U.S. Catholic*, where this selection originally appeared in April 1998.

Suggestions for Prereading or Journal Writing

1.

What do you think is the primary purpose of television: to inspire, to instruct, to entertain? Explain.

2.

What do you think—are television characters, in general, realistic portrayals of the general population? Explain.

It's been just about a year since Ellen DeGeneres and the character she plays on her ABC sitcom came out of the closet. Time enough for all the media hype around this "sweeps week" event to dissipate, and for those of us curled up on our couches to wonder if the much ballyhooed episode was one giant leap for gays and lesbians everywhere—or just one small step for ABC/Disney's ratings.

On the plus side, gay couples can now adopt children in New Jersey, the U.S. bishops voted in November to recommend that parents everywhere should love and nurture their homosexual children, and Bill Clinton recently attended a formal dinner for gays and lesbians. But it would be hard to hang all the credit or blame on DeGeneres. After all, by the time she came out of the closet—on *Prime Time Live*, *Oprah*, and the cover of *Time*—there were already close to two dozen recurring gay characters on TV, including, among others, lesbian and/or gay couples on *Roseanne*, *Mad About You*, *NYPD Blue*, and *Friends*. And don't forget the assorted homosexuals on *Spin City*, *Frasier*, and *The Simpsons*.

Of course, it wasn't always this way. Not so very long ago gays and lesbians were invisible on television, and when they showed up in films they tended to be cast as either guilt-ridden deviants or pathological sadists. In *Suddenly Last Summer* (1959), Montgomery Clift played a tortured lover of boys who is brutally murdered for his guilty passion, while in *Advise and Consent* (1962) and *The Children's Hour* (1962), rumors of homosexual love drove both Don Murray's and Shirley McLaine's characters to suicide. Meanwhile, in dozens of Roman epics and World War II dramas, the most sadistic of Caligulas or Gestapo agents were inevitably portrayed as full-lipped and tubercular dandies with an appetite for "the love that dare not speak its name." To be really mean in Hollywood, it seems, it helped to be homosexual.

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Even today these tired stereotypes continue to be trotted out with some regularity. Most recently Albert Finney gave us a reprise of the homosexual as a desperately lonely deviant in *A Man of No Importance* (1994), and he is joined by the killers in *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (1977), *Cruising* (1980), *Basic Instinct* (1992), and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), as well as by the foppish evil Prince Edward in Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* (1994). This is evidence enough that sadistic gays continue to play well in tinsel town. As Rob Epstein's 1995 documentary *The Celluloid Closet* and David Johnson's *The Lavender Lens: 100 Years of Celluloid Queens* (1996) both argue, when they haven't been invisible, homosexuals have usually been treated as either pathetic or despicable. Yet in the past several years significant strides have been made, both in Hollywood and on TV. And while cruel and silly stereotypes still endure, a rich variety of gay and lesbian characters have begun to surface on both the small and big screens, at first in small cameos and later in major, often complex, and interesting parts.

Love in a Time of Plague

One fresh set of gay roles that began to appear in the mid-'80s concerned young men and women coming to grips with AIDS. The screen showed ordinary, compassionate, and frightened people trying to make sense of their experience of love, secrecy, and death in the midst of the growing plague.

As many of us began to hear about or attend the all-too-early funerals of friends, relatives, and—occasionally—clergy who had died of AIDS, the stories of these personal losses began to surface in films and TV movies like *An Early Frost* (1985), *Our Sons* (1991), and *The Gloaming* (1997). Usually they starred mothers played by the likes of Gena Rowlands, Julie Andrews, and Glenn Close—and handsome, decent, and dying sons like Aidan Quinn and Hugh Grant (whose character behaved much better as a homosexual than his character did as a straight man in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*). Often enough these stories were about reconciliation, about forgiving parents and friends who couldn't abide the central character's orientation, about letting go of old hurts and trying to accept one another for who we really are. They are also tales of courage and fidelity, of lovers accompanying each other through the long processes of illness and death, and about coming to grips with grief and abandonment. *Philadelphia* (1993) and *Love! Valor! Compassion!* (1997) are two of my favorite movies that deal with some of these issues.

Out of the Birdcage

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But not all the roles have been for the Aidan Quinn and Tom Hanks types. Some fresh opportunities are to be found in madcap comedies that have turned old homosexual stereotypes inside out by going way, way over the top.

In movies such as *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* (1995), and *The Birdcage* (Mike Nichols' and Elaine May's 1996 remake of *La Cage aux Folles*), actors like Nathan Lane and Robin Williams, as well as Patrick Swayze and Wesley Snipes, got to play outlandishly funny and deeply sympathetic characters in whom there was clearly no perverse or unnatural moral disorder. In these movies the joke was not on the gays but the straights, or at least those straights whose uptight homophobia kept them from recognizing the humanity of men who wear—and look terrific in—dresses.

Perfectly Gay?

Most recently there's been something of a surge in what might be called “drop-dead perfect” gay characters. These are men and women who aren't merely just as nice, attractive, and moral as their heterosexual neighbors, but who are indeed a whole lot better.

I first noticed this trend in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) where the gay couple in the story proves to be eminently more stable, mature, and poetic than any of the gaggle of rather silly straights running from bedroom to bedroom in search of true love. So too are the lesbian couples in *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991) and *Antonia's Line* (1995), who are just smarter and nicer than the folks around them. Indeed, the “straight” gene pool in both of these films seems terribly shallow and polluted.

Certainly the clearest examples of this new phenomenon are Tom Selleck and Kevin Kline in *In and Out* (1997) and Rupert Everett as Julia Roberts' editor and friend in *My*

Best Friend's Wedding (1997). Cary Grant and Fred Astaire together never have more charm and grace than these guys, nor Henry Fonda and Gregory Peck more integrity.
The Current Movement

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And just what are we to make of all this increased coverage of gays and lesbians on television and at the movies? What are we to think about the presence of dozens of gay and lesbian characters on cable and the networks, about the mainstreaming of homosexual roles in movies playing at the local cineplex rather than the art theater downtown?

Does the increased presence of gays and lesbians in our visual mass entertainment translate into progress and increased understanding, or are they simply being added as local color?

On the downside I sometimes wonder if any group, particularly one identified by its sexuality, is likely to get either fair play or intelligent treatment from a medium designed for visual stereotyping.

After all, look at the way primetime TV portrays heterosexuals on shows like *Married with Children*, *Spin City*, *Men Behaving Badly*, *Cybil*, *Seinfeld*, and *Frasier*. Amidst this assortment of silly, shallow, and pathetically oversexed cartoon characters, it would certainly be tough to find either an intelligent presentation of the meaning and challenges of adult sexuality—or role models for adolescents seeking guidance or inspiration in healthy relationship matters. (OK, *Mad About You* does a nice, funny job, but it's clearly the exception that proves the rule.)

And in a medium that loves to fill its afternoon programming with carnival sideshows populated by pathetic folks willing to show their sexual dysfunction to the gaping audience, can we really expect serious reflection or conversation about the morality or experience of homosexuality?

The Power of TV

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And yet, in another sense, TV and film are probably the best place for gays and lesbians—and other groups affected by bias and discrimination—to be. Although these visual mediums usually lack any subtlety or capacity to engage us in serious reflection, they can often slip their messages past our defenses and get us used to seeing and watching people we might not normally meet or attend to. TV and movies can bring gays and lesbians into the living rooms of our imagination and get them walking around inside our heads—debunking other images created by ignorance and bias.

It's true that homophobia and gay-bashing won't be stopped by putting more gays on TV, or even by giving them good roles and interesting characters to play, but it's also true that Bill Cosby's friendly, intelligent, and witty presence in hundreds of millions of American households over the past 30 years has done more than a little good for the cause of racial harmony in America.

It's also true that the growing presence of gays and lesbians on TV and in films offers role models—mostly silly, but sometimes helpful—for young men and women who are gay or lesbian and who need to know they have a place among us.

So the growth of roles, particularly sympathetic ones, for homosexual characters over the past dozen years or so has for the most part been good news for gays and straights alike. And even though Ellen's coming out of the closet last April was hardly the start, or even the height of this progress, this overhyped media event may turn out to have been important precisely because the character DeGeneres plays is so ordinary, so commonplace.

Neither tortured nor despicable, Ellen is also not particularly brave, gracious—or in my opinion—riotously funny. Instead, she is just an ordinarily neurotic and humorous sitcom character whose personality isn't more pathetic than Drew Carey's or Cybil's. And for that very reason she may indeed represent some small but real step in our society's gradual recognition of the humanity of gays and lesbians.

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Even more than the brave men and women struggling with AIDS, or the suave, debonair folks in some recent films, Ellen represents homosexuals as being just as ordinary as the rest of us—revealing them as just as normal, decent, neurotic, foibled, and funny as straight people. She lets us know not only that gays and lesbians aren't demons and perverts, but also that they don't need to be Jackie Robinsons or Madame Curies. Gays and lesbians are simply the folks sitting next to us in the bleachers or doctor's waiting room. And that's not a mean achievement.

Suggestions for Writing and Discussion

1.

What, exactly, is the author's main point, and where do you find it stated (or implied) in this piece?

2.

Give your insights into any one movie or show you've seen that is mentioned in this piece.

3.

How knowledgeable do you think McCormick is on this topic? Provide support from the text for your answer.

4.

What does the author think: Are characters on television realistic? In what ways does your prereading response connect with the author's beliefs here?

5.

What support does the author provide for his statement that Bill Cosby has "done more than a little good for the racial harmony in America"? What proof might he be able to offer?

6.

In what ways is the article appropriate for its readership? In what publications might this same article not be quite so appropriate?

Suggestions for Extended Thinking and Writing

1.

Watch several episodes of a popular television show in order to find support for or arguments against several of the claims the author makes in this piece.

2.

Find another article on this same topic from a different publication. Compare and contrast this author's points, sources, and appeals to McCormick's.

3.

Ask a gay or lesbian friend to read McCormick's article and comment on it. Report on this reader's opinions and insights.

ANN POWERS

The Stresses of Youth, the Strains of Its Music

Ann Powers contributed four chapters to the Rolling Stone Book of Women in Rock (1997), coedited Rock She Wrote: Women Write about Rock, Pop, and Rap (with Evelyn McDonnell, 1995), and wrote Weird Like Us: My Bohemian America (2000). She also writes about popular music for the New York Times, where this selection originally appeared on April 25, 1999, as part of the paper's coverage of the shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado.

Suggestions for Prereading or Journal Writing

1.

What explanations can you offer for the reasons why students in America today are killing other students?

2.

Freewrite about your musical preferences during your adolescent years. What types of music did you prefer, and how much were you affected by it?

The killing spree by two young fans of computerized gladiator matches and gut-wrenching industrial rock last week in Littleton, Colo., was a calamity measured in lives lost and damaged. But the tragedy at Columbine High School also marked yet another battle over the meanings and effects of youth culture.

News analysts have dwelled on the ominous details of the leisure pursuits of the youths, Dylan Klebold, 17, and Eric Harris, 18. The boys had obsessively played cartoonishly bloody video games like Doom and Quake, worn the black clothing long favored by hard-rock fans and listened to the operatically gruesome music of Marilyn Manson and the German bands Rammstein and KMFDM. They also appear to have idolized Adolf Hitler, which is not true of many young people who share their tastes.

Early reports called the youths Goths, but practitioners of that lifestyle, which favors more romantic music and androgynous fashions, quickly declared that real Goths are not violent, racist or fans of Marilyn Manson. The music industry also distanced itself from the boys. Hilary Rosen, president of the Recording Industry Association of America, expressed sympathy for the victims but insisted that music "does not drive teen-agers to violent despair."

Sascha Konietzko of KMFDM, whose ferocious lyrics Harris had posted on his Web site, released a statement saying his group steadfastly denounced "war, oppression, fascism and violence against others." Marilyn Manson called the killings "tragic and disgusting."

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Meanwhile, psychiatrists and social workers offered the familiar argument that popular images of carnage inevitably affect susceptible youths, while editorial page writers

wondered how two young men with such floridly grisly tastes could proceed unnoticed by parents or peers. Yet the limited nature of the continuing debate about extreme popular culture points to how such an oversight could happen.

Rarely do either the advocates or the enemies of popular culture approach the subject with clarity and close attention. KMFDM is a case in point. The group, which recently disbanded, has long been an industrial-rock pioneer, blending machine-generated dance beats with pop melodies and random dissonance. Its lyrics are harsh, like its sound, sometimes expressing destructive urges in blatant terms. One that Harris might have taken to heart, from the song “Piggybank,” reads, “If I had a shotgun, I’d blow myself to hell.”

Such sentiments, enforced by the music’s body-thumping rush, could be felt by a troubled listener as a prod toward destruction. But like Harris’ other favorites—Rammstein and Marilyn Manson—KMFDM links the tumult it generates to a longing for inner peace. The group also has an absurdist side, obvious in performance, as the 7-foot-tall cross-dressing vocalist En Esch vies for attention with Konietzko, who appears as a Mad Max-like antihero. Humor is just one way these artists tell their fans that they do not mean to be taken literally.

Today’s extreme rock music, like most popular culture, sends a swarm of mixed messages. Its makers can be calculatedly brutish, and often fail when they try for subtlety. After all, they are operating in exile from adulthood, expected to be immature. Yet even the rawest extreme music offers adolescents a symbolic language with which to express the confusion they already feel. Communicating the anguish of victims and outcasts in a voice of vengeance and aggression, it theatricalizes rage.

Most fans simply leave their frenzy at the concert hall door. But organized adult responses to this difficult music often fail to grasp the difference between metaphor and reality.

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The attempt to regulate popular culture is evident in the nationwide phenomenon of gang- and cult-awareness seminars that associate an interest in extreme rock with mental illness, which only confirms the fears, or fantasies, of many fans that they are doing something terribly wrong.

Officer Steve Rickard of the Denver Police Department, who gave one such seminar to students at Columbine High School only three weeks before the shootings there, hopes parents will look harder at the culture their children consume—if only to be better equipped to dissuade them. “Could you look your mother in the eye and defend it?” he said in a telephone interview. “I don’t think so.”

Rickard, who said he had deeply examined the materials he criticizes, argued against separating one’s tastes from one’s self. “I tell the kids they are who their friends are, and that to a certain extent, you are what you expose your mind and body to,” he said.

Many young people do feel essentially tied to artists they admire. Some need help to navigate their passions. Teachers have long showed students how to grasp the nuances in literature and history. But instead of actually exploring youth culture in the company of young people, many adults debate its legality among themselves. Critics quote lyrics out of context and misinterpret jokes as threats. Advocates—often culture industry professionals—stress the First Amendment while expressing personal distaste for adolescent fare. The artists themselves grow sullen and silent.

Popular art aimed at adolescents often trades in alienation. Adults who try to comprehend it violate the generational boundary that is part of its appeal. They risk looking foolish and being ignored. But it is impossible to understand young people apart from their interpretations—and misinterpretations—of the fashions and fads they love, for they add to the sense of self that leads them to act.

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In Littleton, the failure of anyone to gaze across this gap apparently aided disaster.

Suggestions for Writing and Discussion

1.

From the opening three paragraphs, how would you characterize the tone of this piece? Offer specific words and phrases as support for your answer.

2.

Explain the differences in what newspaper editors and psychiatrists see as the causes of violence. Which group's ideas would you most likely favor?

3.

Respond to KMFDM's assertion that its music is about establishing inner peace and is not to be taken seriously. How sincere and true do you find that statement to be? Why?

4.

Who does the author feel is ultimately responsible for the increase in student violence against other students? Where do you find this stated in the article?

5.

Who or what does the author refrain from blaming? What do you think about this omission?

Suggestions for Extended Writing and Thinking

1.

Think back on your own adolescent days and analyze the factors that most shaped who you were at the time. In what ways does your own experience support or refute what McCormick shows in this piece?

2.

"I tell the kids, you are who your friends are." Explain who your close friends were in either junior high or high school, and analyze the effect, both short-lived and long-term, they might have had on you.

3.

Interview several high school students about the Columbine incident to learn what their opinions are about the causes of school violence. Write a report in which you compare the students' responses to the assertions made by McCormick and others in this piece.

FRANK CHIN

Donald Duk and the White Monsters

After playwright Frank Chin (born in 1940 in Berkeley, California) finished college and attended the Writer's Workshop at the University of Iowa, he went to work for the railroad and became Southern Pacific Railroad's first Chinese American brakeman.

From there, he moved to Seattle as a writer for a television station and then returned to

California, where he taught Asian Studies at San Francisco State University and the University of California at Davis. In 1982 he founded the Asian American Theater Workshop. His play The Chickencoop Chinaman was the first play by a Chinese American to be produced on the New York stage. Chin's novel Donald Duk (1991), like his plays and essays, attempts to dispel stereotypes about Chinese Americans. The protagonist is a shy twelve-year-old boy whose ambivalence about his Chinese heritage is described in this selection, the opening section of the novel. As the novel progresses through the fifteen days of the Chinese New Year celebration, Donald has a series of haunting dreams about a crew of Chinese railway workers in California in the 1860s, in which he discovers that his ancestors were strong and brave and not the "passive and nonassertive" immigrants described in his history class.

Suggestions for Prereading or Journal Writing

1.

From your observations and recollections of television and movie characters, how are most Chinese characters, both male and female, depicted?

2.

Write about a stereotype that others outside of a culture to which you belong often hold? How true is this generalization? What is your reaction to it?

Who would believe anyone named Donald Duk dances like Fred Astaire? Donald Duk does not like his name. Donald Duk never liked his name. He hates his name. He is not a duck. He is not a cartoon character. He does not go home to sleep in Disneyland every night. The kids that laugh at him are very smart. Everyone at his private school is smart. Donald Duk is smart. He is a gifted one, they say.

No one in school knows he takes tap dance lessons from a man who calls himself "The Chinese Fred Astaire." Mom talks Dad into paying for the lessons and tap shoes. Fred Astaire. Everybody everywhere likes Fred Astaire in the old black-and-white movies. Late at night on TV, even Dad smiles when Fred Astaire dances. Mom hums along. Donald Duk wants to live the late night life in old black-and-white movies and talk with his feet like Fred Astaire, and smile Fred Astaire's sweet lemonade smile. The music teacher and English teacher in school go dreamy eyed when they talk about seeing Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers on the late-night TV. "Remember when he danced with Barbara Stanwyck? What was the name of that movie . . . ?"

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"Barbara Stanwyck?"

"Did you see the one where he dances with Rita Hayworth?"

"Oooh, Rita Hayworth!"

Donald Duk enjoys the books he reads in school. The math is a curious game. He is not the only Chinese in the private school. But he is the only Donald Duk. He avoids the other Chinese here. And the Chinese seem to avoid him. This school is a place where the Chinese are comfortable hating Chinese. "Only the Chinese are stupid enough to give a kid a stupid name like Donald Duk," Donald Duk says to himself. "And if the Chinese were that smart, why didn't they invent tap dancing?"

Donald Duk's father's name is King. King Duk. Donald hates his father's name. He hates being introduced with his father. "This is King Duk, and his son Donald Duk." Mom's

name is Daisy. “That’s Daisy Duk, and her son Donald.” Venus Duk and Penny Duk are Donald’s sisters. The girls are twins and a couple of years older than Donald.

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His own name is driving him crazy! Looking Chinese is driving him crazy! All his teachers are making a big deal about Chinese stuff in their classes because of Chinese New Year coming on soon. The teacher of California History is so happy to be reading about the Chinese. “The man I studied history under at Berkeley authored this book. He was a spellbinding lecturer,” the teacher throbs. Then he reads, “The Chinese in America were made passive and nonassertive by centuries of Confucian thought and Zen mysticism. They were totally unprepared for the violently individualistic and democratic Americans. From their first step on American soil to the middle of the twentieth century, the timid, introverted Chinese have been helpless against the relentless victimization by aggressive, highly competitive Americans.

“One of the Confucian concepts that makes the Chinese vulnerable to the assertive ways of the West is ‘the mandate of heaven.’ As the European kings of old ruled by divine right, so the emperors of China ruled by the mandate of heaven.” The teacher takes a breath and looks over his spellbound class. Donald wants to barf pink and green stuff all over the teacher’s book.

“What’s he saying?” Donald Duk’s pal Arnold Azalea asks in a whisper.

“Same thing as everybody—Chinese are artsy, cutesy and chicken-dick.” Donald whispers back.

Oh, no! Here comes Chinese New Year again! It is Donald Duk’s worst time of year. Here come the stupid questions about the funny things Chinese believe in. The funny things Chinese do. The funny things Chinese eat. And, “Where can I buy some Chinese firecrackers?”

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And in Chinatown it’s *Goong hay fot choy* everywhere. And some gang kids do sell firecrackers. And some gang kids rob other kids looking for firecrackers. He doesn’t like the gang kids. He doesn’t like speaking their Chinese. He doesn’t have to—this is America. He doesn’t like Chinatown. But he lives here.

The gang kids know him. They call him by name. One day the Frog Twins wobble onto the scene with their load of full shopping bags. There is Donald Duk. And there are five gang boys and two girlfriends chewing gum, swearing and smirking. The gang kids wear black tanker jackets, white tee shirts and baggy black denim jeans. It is the alley in front of the Chinese Historical Society Museum. There are fish markets on each side of the Chinatown end of the alley. Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s famous City Lights Bookstore is at the end that opens on Columbus Street. Suddenly there are the Frog Twins in their heavy black overcoats. They seem to be wearing all the clothes they own under their coats. Their coats bulge. Under their skirts they wear several pairs of trousers and slacks. They wear one knit cap over the other. They wear scarves tied over their heads and shawls over their shoulders.

That night, after he is asleep, Dad comes home from the restaurant and wakes him up. “You walk like a sad softie,” Dad says. “You look like you want everyone to beat you up.”

“I do not!” Donald Duk says.

“You look at yourself in the mirror,” Dad says, and Donald Duk looks at himself in his full-length dressing mirror. “Look at those slouching shoulders, that pouty face. Look at those hands holding onto each other. You look scared!” Dad’s voice booms and Donald hears everyone’s feet hit the floor. Mom and the twins are out in the hall looking into his open door.

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“I am scared!” Donald Duk says.

“I don’t care if you are scared,” Dad says. His eyes sizzle into Donald Duk’s frightened pie-eyed stare. “Be as scared as you want to be, but don’t look scared. Especially when you walk through Chinatown.”

“How do I look like I’m not scared if I *am* scared?” Donald Duk asks.

“You walk with your back straight. You keep your hands out of your pockets. Don’t hunch your shoulders. Think of them as being down. Keep your head up. Look like you know where you’re going. Walk like you know where you’re going. And you say, ‘Don’t mess with me, horsepuckie! Don’t mess with me!’ But you don’t say it with your mouth. You say it with your eyes. You say it with your hands where everybody can see them. Anybody get two steps in front of you, you zap them with your eyes, and they had better nod at you or look away. When they nod, you nod. When you walk like nobody better mess with you, nobody will mess with you. When you walk around like you’re walking now, all rolled up in a little ball and hiding out from everything, they’ll get you for sure.” Donald does not like his dad waking him up like that and yelling at him. But what the old man says works. Outside among the cold San Francisco shadows and the early morning shoppers, Donald Duk hears his father’s voice and straightens his back, takes his hands out of his pockets, says “Don’t mess with me!” with his eyes and every move of his body. And, yes, he’s talking with his body the way Fred Astaire talks, and shoots every gang kid who walks toward him in the eye with a look that says, “Don’t mess with me.” And no one messes with him. Dad never talks about it again.

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Later, gang kids laugh at his name and try to pick fights with him during the afternoon rush hour, Dad’s busy time in the kitchen. Donald is smarter than these lowbrow beady-eyed goons. He has to beat them without fighting them because he doesn’t know how to fight. Donald Duk gets the twins to talk about it with Dad while they are all at the dining room table working on their model airplanes.

Dad laughs. “So he has a choice. He does not like people laughing at his name. He does not want the gangsters laughing at his name to beat him up. He mostly does not want to look like a sissy in front of them, so what can he do?”

“He can pay them to leave him alone,” Venus says.

“He can not! That is so chicken it’s disgusting!” Penelope says.

“So, our little brother is doomed.”

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“He can agree with them and laugh at his name,” Dad says. “He can tell them lots of Donald Duk jokes. Maybe he can learn to talk that quack-quack Donald Duck talk.”

“Whaaat?” the twins ask in one voice.

“If he keeps them laughing,” Dad says, “even if he can just keep them listening, they are not beating him up, right? And they are not calling him a sissy. He does not want to fight? He does not have to fight. He has to use his smarts, okay? If he’s smart enough, he

makes up some Donald Duck jokes to surprise them and make them laugh. They laugh three times, he can walk away. Leave them there laughing, thinking Donald Duk is one terrific fella.”

“So says King Duk,” Venus Duk flips. The twins often talk as if everything they hear everybody say and see everybody do is dialog in a memoir they’re writing or action in a play they’re directing. This makes Mom feel like she’s on stage and drives Donald Duk crazy.

“Is that Chinese psychology, dear?” Daisy Duk asks.

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“Daisy Duk inquires,” says Penelope Duk.

“And little Donnie Duk says, *Oh, Mom!* and sighs.”

“I do not!” Donald Duk yelps at the twins.

“Well, then, say it,” Penelope Duk says. “It’s a good line. So *you*, you know.”

“Thank you,” Venus says.

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“Oh goshes, you all, your sympathy is so . . . so . . . so literary. So dramatic,” Donald Duk says. “It is truly depressing.”

“I thought it was narrative,” Venus says.

“Listen up for some Chinese psychology, girls and boys,” Daisy Duk says.

“No, that’s not psychology, that’s Bugs Bunny,” Dad says.

“You don’t mean, Bugs Bunny, dear. You always make that mistake.”

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“Br’er Rabbit!” Dad says.

“What does that mean?” Donald Duk asks the twins. They shrug their shoulders. Nobody knows what Br’er Rabbit has to do with Dad’s way of avoiding a fight and not being a fool, but it works.

One bright and sunny afternoon, a gang boy stops Donald and talks to him in the quacking voice of Walt Disney’s Donald Duck. The voice breaks Donald Duk’s mind for a flash, and he is afraid to turn on his own Donald Duck voice. He tries telling a joke about Donald Duck not wearing trousers or shoes, when the gangster—in black jeans, black tee shirt, black jacket, black shades—says in a perfect Donald Duck voice, “Let’s take the pants off Donald Duk!”

“Oh oh! I stepped in it now!” Donald Duk says in his Donald Duck voice and stuns the gangster and his two gangster friends and their three girlfriends. Everything is seen and understood very fast. Without missing a beat, his own perfect Donald Duck voice cries for help in perfect Cantonese *Gow meng ahhhh!* and they all laugh. Old women pulling little wire shopping carts full of fresh vegetables stop and stare at him. Passing children recognize the voice and say Donald Duck talks Chinese.

“Don’t let these monsters take off my pants. I may be Donald Duk, but I am as human as you,” he says in Chinese, in his Donald Duck voice, “I know how to use chopsticks. I use flush toilets. Why shouldn’t I wear pants on Grant Street in Chinatown?” They all laugh more than three times. Their laughter roars three times on the corner of Grant and Jackson, and Donald Duk walks away, leaving them laughing, just the way Dad says he can. He feels great. Just great!

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Donald Duk does not want to laugh about his name forever. There has to be an end to this. There is an end to all kidstuff for a kid. An end to diapers. An end to nursery rhymes and fairy tales. There has to be an end to laughing about his name to get out of a fight. Chinese New Year. Everyone will be laughing. He is twelve years old. Twelve years old is special to the Chinese. There are twelve years in the Asian lunar zodiac. For each year there is an animal. This year Donald will complete his first twelve-year cycle of his life. To celebrate, Donald Duk's father's old opera mentor, Uncle Donald Duk, is coming to San Francisco to perform a Cantonese opera. Donald Duk does not want Chinese New Year. He does not want his uncle Donald Duk to tell him again how Daddy was a terrible man to name his little boy Donald Duk, because all the *bok gwai*, the white monsters, will think he is named after that barebutt cartoon duck in the top half of a sailor suit and no shoes.

Suggestions for Writing and Discussion

1.

In what ways is Donald Duk like most other twelve-year-olds? In what ways is he different?

2.

What's your impression of Donald Duk and his family?

3.

In comparing the Eastern philosophy that values the individual submitting to the greater good of the community and the Western philosophy that upholds the rights of the individual, which do you find more "worthy"? Explain.

4.

Respond to the advice the father gives his son. What do you think of it? What other insights might you offer the son?

5.

What parts in this story did you find particularly humorous? Why?

Suggestions for Extended Writing and Thinking

1.

Many writers agree that humor is often difficult to write. However, consider trying your hand at it, and write an essay in which you take a humorous approach to something that once happened to you around the age of twelve.

2.

What's in a name? Write an essay in which you explain the meaning and implications behind your own name.

3.

Research Confucius. Who was he, when did he live, what were his beliefs, and how do you think the modern world might respond to him if he were around today?

SHARON OLDS

The Death of Marilyn Monroe

Born in San Francisco, Sharon Olds did her undergraduate work at Stanford University and then earned her doctorate at Columbia University. She published her first book of poetry, Satan Says, in 1980, when she was 37. Since then she has written seven more

books of poetry, founded a writing program for the severely physically disabled, and been chosen Poet Laureate of New York (1998–2000). Currently, she chairs New York University’s Creative Writing Program. “The Death of Marilyn Monroe” comes from her second book, The Dead and the Living (1984), which won the National Book Critics Circle Award.

Suggestions for Prereading or Journal Writing

1.

If you could spend a day with any celebrity of your choice, who would you spend it with and why?

2.

Write everything you know—and don’t know—about Marilyn Monroe.

The ambulance men touched her cold
body, lifted it, heavy as iron,
onto the stretcher, tried to close the
mouth, closed the eyes, tied the
arms to the sides, moved a caught

strand of hair, as if it mattered,
saw the shape of her breasts, flattened by
gravity, under the sheet,
carried her, as if it were she,
down the steps.

These men were never the same. They went out
afterwards, as they always did,
for a drink or two, but they could not meet
each other’s eyes.
Their lives took

a turn—one had nightmares, strange
pains, impotence, depression. One did not
like his work, his wife looked
different, his kids. Even death
seemed different to him—a place where she

would be waiting.
And one found himself standing at night
in the doorway to a room of sleep, listening to
a woman breathing, just an ordinary
woman

breathing.

Suggestions for Writing and Discussion

1.

In one sentence, what is your overall reaction to this poem?

2.

Discuss the significance of the major images in the opening stanza. From these images alone, what might you conclude about the speaker?

3.

What does the author mean in line 9 “as if it were she”? How does this line relate to the author’s theme here?

4.

What about their experience might render the men “never the same”? In what way can you identify with this same experience?

5.

What is the author implying in the last stanza? What has that to do with readers, in general?

Suggestions for Extended Thinking and Writing

1.

Research the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* for news articles and editorials that were written in the days following Marilyn Monroe’s death. Analyze how the media reacted to this event. What were the major insights and concerns at the time?

2.

Using the same research material you gathered for question 1, write your own poem about Marilyn Monroe (or the reactions to her death) by using the most vivid images and verbs you have found in the writing from the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*.

3.

Write about the ways your own illusions about a celebrity were changed because of information that came out about his or her private life.

TOPICS FOR MAKING CONNECTIONS:

POPULAR CULTURE AND MEDIA MESSAGES

1. Take one specific culture to which you belong—female adolescent, middle-aged male, Hispanic female, middle-aged waitress, male athlete, African American businessman, and so on—and trace the portrayal of this specific culture through TV, magazine ads, and current movies today. Draw conclusions about how true this portrayal is, in terms of your own experience and what you’ve learned.

2. Write a dialogue in which you attempt to bridge the gap between any two authors or characters in this chapter.

3. Choose any three pieces from this chapter and analyze the cultural values inherent in them.

4. Compare and contrast the opening strategies used by three of the essayists in this chapter. What conclusions can you draw about what a good introduction ought to do in order to be effective?

5. Choose the one piece in this chapter that had the greatest impact on you. Evaluate both the reading and your response as a reader in order to come to some conclusions about the responsibilities of an author to his or her audience and the responsibility of a reader to a written piece.

6. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Assume and synthesize the roles of three characters or authors in this chapter as you attempt to answer this biblical question.

7. Besides firsthand experience, how else do we come to know the world around us? Refer to several pieces in this chapter as well as your own experience in order to effectively answer this question.

8. Write an essay in which you analyze the possible dangers of modern media, and write a proposal that you believe will remedy this danger.

9. Write an essay on one piece in this chapter that made you change your way of thinking, one that altered your previous assumption on a topic. Analyze why this piece of writing had such an effect on you, and explain how you have changed as a result.

10. Marshall McLuhan wrote that “the medium is the message.” Analyze how one specific medium—such as television, magazine advertising, radio, movies—impacts and affects the messages we receive. Use any appropriate sources from this chapter for support.

11. Write an original short story or poem in which the media play a major part in the conflict.

12. As a semester project, make a video that connects in some way to several pieces and themes you’ve encountered in this chapter.

What messages are conveyed by the images in each of these photos? How does each relate to the sense of commercialism in American culture?